

John Bock

Hell's Bells: A Western

01 March – 13 April 2017

62 Kingly St London W1

Tuesday – Saturday, 11 – 6pm

John Bock's fourth exhibition at Sadie Coles HQ centres on a new film, *Hell's Bells*. Starring leading German actors including Lars Eidinger, Bibiana Beglau, Frank Seppeler and Laurenz Leky, the feature-length work transforms the genre of the Western into a melodramatic and meandering story populated by allegorical characters. *Hell's Bells* is being screened alongside an extensive group of sculptures and collages relating to characters and episodes in the film.

Hell's Bells unfolds in a gloomy, nocturnal realm centering on an unnamed town. Bock tells the story of a stranger (Beglau), who arrives in town accompanied by a deaf child. The child influences the actions and fates of the other characters like a puppeteer pulling invisible strings, steering the plot from within. Inflicting death out of sheer boredom and capriciousness, she symbolises mysterious malevolence, but is also a retributive power, using the figure of the stranger as a proxy or weapon for inflicting harm on other evil characters.



Bock's characters recall the classic roles of the Western genre – a hero, a villain and (in the tortured figure of the priest, played by Seppeler) something in-between. Yet as the plot develops and takes unexpected turns, these personae are invested with subtler shades of individualization and strangeness. The stranger is a brooding, silent and fearsome presence – described by Bock as “a black, ghostly shadow” throughout the story. By contrast, the priest is filled with self-loathing, struggling with his loss of faith and the hypocrisy of his existence. The villain (Eidinger) is a witty and flamboyant jester, who strings along the other characters through grandiose and humorous ruses; while being thwarted, in the end, by his own cynicism. Leky's character, gun-shot-wound-Jo, is the archetypal funny guy who gets shot and injured repeatedly but never dies. Cinematic tropes are similarly redeployed and subverted: the classic Western moment of an injured person pulling a bullet from their flesh unravels into a frenetic ritual, acted out by a mad doctor in a hellish surgery.

The 'gang' (a band of extras) meanwhile functions as a servile, evil mass, sucking special energy out of the film's ominous stage-sets or 'diagrams'. Bock's elaborate stagecraft becomes an agent in the drama – fantastical mechanical devices appear together with slimy, biomorphic ones. This stagecraft is reflected and multiplied in the sculptures installed in the main gallery. These translate the film's props, objects and sets into a cast of sculptural 'characters' akin to the human agents. In contrast to previous projects in which Bock has created a single sculptural installation in parallel to a film, *Hell's Bells* has given rise to a series of elaborate structures, separated using fabric 'shadows' suspended from the ceiling. Particular sequences and scenes have evolved into stand-alone sculptures and assemblages, extending the story beyond the parameters of the original film. By mutating from a film prop into a sculpture, developed after the shoot, each object operates on both a sculptural and narrative level – offering a sequel or spin-off to the main plot.

Sargobjekt (Coffin object), for example, has as its central motif the coffin that figures prominently in the film. Other works include a flagellation contraption and a stage-like saloon bar, structures in which cinematic action is condensed into a sculptural tableau. In a group of 3-D collages, framed in perspex boxes, stills of the film are sliced and amalgamated into single compositions, suggesting fractured and rearranged film posters or storyboards. In these works, Bock compresses the moods of romance, heroism, horror and kitsch which thread through *Hell's Bells*.

John Bock (b. 1965, Gribbohm) lives and works in Berlin. In 2017 he will stage solo exhibitions at The Contemporary Austin, Texas, and La Panacée, Montpellier. Solo exhibitions include *Im Moloch der Wesenspräsenz*, Berlinische Galerie, Berlin (2017); *John Bock. Im Modder der Sonnenmutation*, Bundeskunsthalle, Bonn (2013); *Der Pappenheimer*, John Bock, Kunstverein Hamburg, Hamburg (2013); *Kreatürliche Unschuld*, The Hindelooper Room, Fries Museum Leeuwarden, Netherlands (2013); *John Bock: Die abgeschmierte Knicklenkung im Gepäck verheddert sich im weißen Hemd*, Städel Museum, Frankfurt (2012); *Nöle*, Centro de Arte Contemporáneo de Málaga (2010); *Curve-Vehicle incl. π-Man(-)*, Barbican, London (2010); and *FischGrätenMelkStand*, Temporäre Kunsthalle, Berlin (2010). Group exhibitions include *Ich - Neue Formen des Selbstportraits*, Schirn Kunsthalle, Frankfurt (2016); *Wolfsburg Unlimited. Eine Stadt als Weltlabor*, Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg (2016); *Poor Art – Rich Legacy, Arte Povera and Parallel Practices 1968 – 2015*, Museum of Contemporary Art, Oslo (2015); *Avatar und Atavismus*, Kunsthalle Düsseldorf (2015); *Storylines: Contemporary Art at the Guggenheim*, Guggenheim Museum, New York (2015); and *Il Palazzo Enciclopedico*, Venice Biennale (2013).

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