

Nada Schroer: No man is an Island  
CLOSER by Julia König

Anyone entering Julia König's exhibition CLOSER at GLASMOOG finds themselves in a fantastic mangrove forest. The windows are lined with orange-coloured foil, the light is reminiscent of an intense sunset or NASA's subsequently coloured Mars images. It signals warmth and a safe distance from reality.

In the room, the artist has piled up building sand into small heaps, scattered like the islands of an archipelago. From the sand islands, black-painted steel poles protrude, reaching up to the ceiling. At the bottom, the bars fork and resemble the roots of a marsh plant. Scattered on the floor are dark, shiny ovals made of plastic. If you know anything about boats, you will recognise so-called fenders in the objects, which are attached to the outer skin of ships as protective bodies to prevent damage. Here and there you can find a dried palm leaf. A monitor showing two video essays by the artist completes the room installation.

When I enter the exhibition, the room is filled with snorkelling sounds. They are part of an animation of a sea turtle enumerating its cultural and mythological meanings in a cuter cartoon voice: Trickster, Lord of the Ocean, a haven for the undead. The turtle is a vessel that we can fill semantically, like the image of a South Sea island, the sight of a sunset, our own persona or the face of the Other.

In the exhibition, one encounters some motifs that bring with them a narrative charge. What are the mechanisms that turn everyday moments into individual or even cultural topoi and random events into a coherent narrative? When does repetition become a stereotype and how can it be demonstrated again?

For me, CLOSER evokes imaginary worlds that could perhaps be described as "island imaginaries" (Gugganig/ Klimburg-Witjes 2021). In this context, the island refers to the warm and secluded. Similar to mangrove forests and fenders, it fulfils the function of a buffer zone. Its supposed seclusion qualifies it as a place where escapist desires can be lived out. Here, at the latest, it becomes clear that the motif of "island imaginaries" is racially and classistically pre-structured. While the motif of the island offers visitors a projection surface for exotic fantasies, for others it represents a living space whose economic reality is determined by mass tourism and geopolitical constraints. For still others, the island is an involuntary stopover in search of better living conditions. On its shores, countless voices and stories wash up, colliding relentlessly. Fates for which no fenders exist.

The impression of charged topographies and biographies has also been inscribed in Julia König's work. She developed the CLOSER project during a stay of several months in the Seychelles. During the Corona pandemic, the island republic relaxed its entry regulations. So it was rather by chance that the artist found herself on a group of islands that, at the latest since the advertising campaigns of the chocolate and alcohol industries in the 90s, has been occupied with the colonial narrative of the "tropical paradise". Not an easy backdrop to avoid overloading.

Chance, which already played a role as an artistic principle in previous works, also became the starting point for CLOSER. Julia König built the project on relationships with people she met unplanned on the islands. Based on numerous conversations with locals, transients and migrants, she finally developed 16 human and more-than-human characters for a ten-episode telenovela. Her artistic approach was guided by the question of how to tell the stories of their encounters without reproducing stereotypes. The format of the miniseries allowed the different narrative strands to be deconstructed and recombined. The result is a mosaic that creates a closeness between the individual characters while avoiding linearity.

She met many of her protagonists on Mahé, the main island of the Seychelles. But people König met in Germany also took part in the project. For the prologue and the first episode, which can also be seen in the exhibition space, she cut together random mobile phone footage of her protagonists in quick succession and combined it with found footage.

The real people remain anonymous. Close-ups of humanoid avatars replace faces, AI speech generators

replace human voices. The monologues were fictionalised by König. They are based on memories of conversations and are mixed with wiki content, news or fairy tales.

Principles of the series format - repetition, exaggeration and interval intensity - seem at the same time to carry the echo of the social and economic reality of the island republic. This has been shaped by political restructuring since the 00s. After gaining independence from Great Britain in 1977, the Seychelles embarked on a path of socialist development, and experienced a currency crisis in 2008. The caesura was followed by the compulsion to liberalise the market. Due to the expansion of the tourism sector, the country saw a rapid increase in the number of visitors in the 2010s. But income inequality, homelessness and drug use also increased - symptoms of drastic social changes. Today, the number of people swells from 99,000 inhabitants in the peak season to almost half a million people. The periodic use of the islands and the high fluctuation affect the quality of social relationships and shape the interplay of boredom and intensity, economic hardship and exuberant luxury, economic hardship and exuberant luxury, geographical beauty and ecological disaster.

These contrasts are reflected in König's telenovela in the juxtaposition between everyday, sometimes idyllic shots and the precarious to extraordinary stories of the protagonists: a fisherman tells of the fishing failures during the monsoon season. Then we follow a sailor as she sets her catamaran on course. As the camera travels across a deserted bay, we learn about the cost of the surgical procedures required for her transition and about her past as a firefighter with the Navi. We also hear from an older man who hid his homosexuality all his life due to religious circumstances. His avatar quotes from the Alcoholics Anonymous manifesto.

Other sequences show scenes from the life of a young Yazidi woman from Iraq who is finishing school in Germany. "Where I come from," a computer voice can be heard, "the sky was always beautiful." The sky is a recurring motif, sometimes with blue, orange or pink gradients. Once her mobile phone picture shows the grey evening sky above a housing estate. The images convey a longing for the lost home and at the same time a level-headed banality, as trivial as the forecasts of a weather app.

And then there is the voice of the turtle again, reciting a saga about the kingdom of sea creatures to images from an underwater camera. A fisherman who gets lost in the depths of the ocean on the back of a turtle finds an aged world when he returns. Time turns out to be a constructed category that loses its validity under water. Here, the laws of deceleration and the hope of a life outside the capitalist compulsion to exploit reign.

Getting lost, finding oneself again, reality and hope. This tension continues in the second episode. Julia König has staged this as a performance in the exhibition space. Here, five different people meet. What they have in common is that they came to Germany at some point in the last three decades. Somewhere along the way they met the artist and agreed to perform together in the orange light. They respond to certain tasks, which they interpret with slight variations and at different speeds. They recite the weather forecasts from cities of their choice, list what they don't like and engrave the names of loved ones and places on the fenders lying around. A woman starts improvising on an electric piano. Her daughter plays in the sand, lost in thought.

As disparate as the short scenes may seem, they echo universal themes such as flight, discrimination and the ongoing search for a better life. The protagonists are united in their struggle for a narrative that makes existence more bearable. Paradise is not in sight, but the possibility of encounter is, on a crowded island, on the back of a turtle or in the thicket of artificial mangroves.