

Pirjetta Brander UNDERCURRENT

25 Mar-3 Sep 2023





Pirjetta Brander, *Cleaning Room 2*, 1998, mixed media on paper. Photo: Sampo Linkoneva.

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Every time I visit **Pirjetta Brander** I find myself jotting down the name of a new writer, poet, cartoonist or artist in my notebook. Brander was fortunate to grow up surrounded by books and art. Her mother was a library director, and her godmother was the printmaker **Marra Lampi**, a master of colour. Both women exerted an immeasurable influence on Brander's life and art. Through her brother, the budding artist discovered **Robert Crumb's** pornographic and psychedelic underground comics, which she devoured unabashedly. Brander was also deeply influenced by **John Vernon Lord's** illustrated storybook *Mr Mead and his Garden* (1974), the graphic novels of **Julie Doucet**, the French cartoonist **Fred**, and **Tove Jansson**.

Brander's art is both intriguing and unashamedly forthright. She looks at life without glossing over the unpleasant muck we know to exist but prefer not to dwell upon. Preachiness and

condemnation of the world's evils is not her style – instead, her art is tempered by parody and warmth of humour.

The works in the exhibition *Undercurrent* are united by the trope of movement and the graphic treatment of line. In one of her animations, a factory spews out commodities on a conveyor belt, while her meticulously executed plant-themed drawings are bursting with teeming life. The viewer's eye is transported across the paper by a cavalcade of absurd details.

For Brander, art is an exercise in knowledge acquisition. Through art, she charts alternative modes of being and ponders strategies for tolerating existence in today's world. This exhibition presents a selection of drawings, graphic art, animation and sculptures from Brander's wide-ranging practice dating from 1996 to 2023.

Artist interview

Every winter, Brander travels to India to carve stone. I emailed her questions that sprang to my mind as I was reflecting on the works in her new exhibition.

PB = Pirjetta Brander, artist

LK = Laura Kuurne, exhibition curator

LK

What things did you discover lurking in the undercurrents, and why did you want to share these specific findings?

PB

Through my art, I try to come to grips with what is going on in the world. That is why my works are so busy – they are packed with a vast array of details, phenomena and impressions, just like the real world is. My art depicts everything that is ceaselessly unfolding before our eyes.

My choice of subject is strongly influenced by my personal experiences and the lives of my loved ones. I also find inspiration in the books I read.

I am interested in contradictions. Think of the values we are raised to believe in – they stand in glaring contrast to what goes on in real life. We are taught to always speak the truth, but people distort the truth all the time.

The title *Undercurrent* denotes things that everyone knows deep down

inside but nobody likes to talk about out loud. These are the topics I often explore in my art.

LK

Your art is full of absurd humour, madcap surrealism and uncanny, even gruesome imagery. You seem to tackle any subject you want, free of inhibitions. Is that true? Is any subject too daunting for you?

PB

"Nothing in life is to be feared, it is only to be understood. Now is the time to understand more, so that we may fear less." – **Marie Curie**

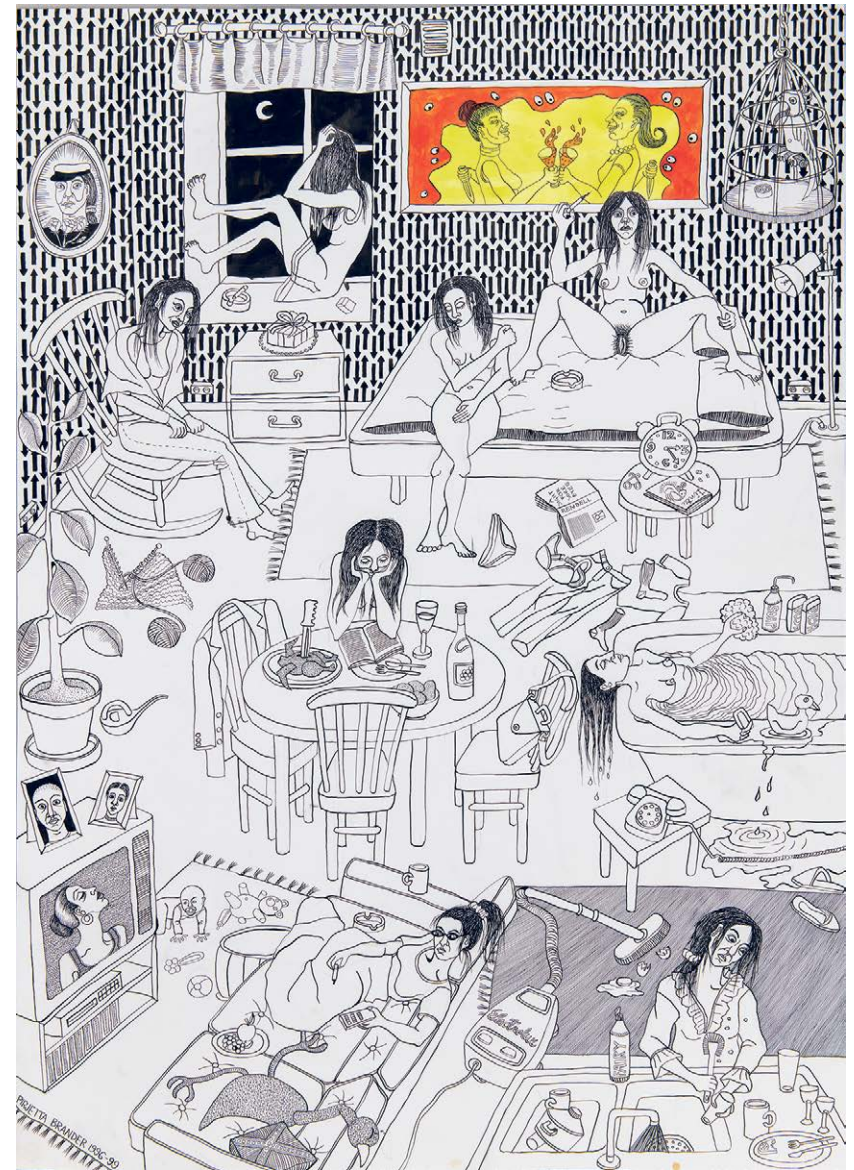
In my opinion, any topic can be addressed in art. Everything is possible in art, but not in life. You can mix and juxtapose an unlimited assortment of topics, ideas, characters, eras, emotions and opinions. Interestingly enough, art is the only place I have ever felt able to vent aggression.

LK

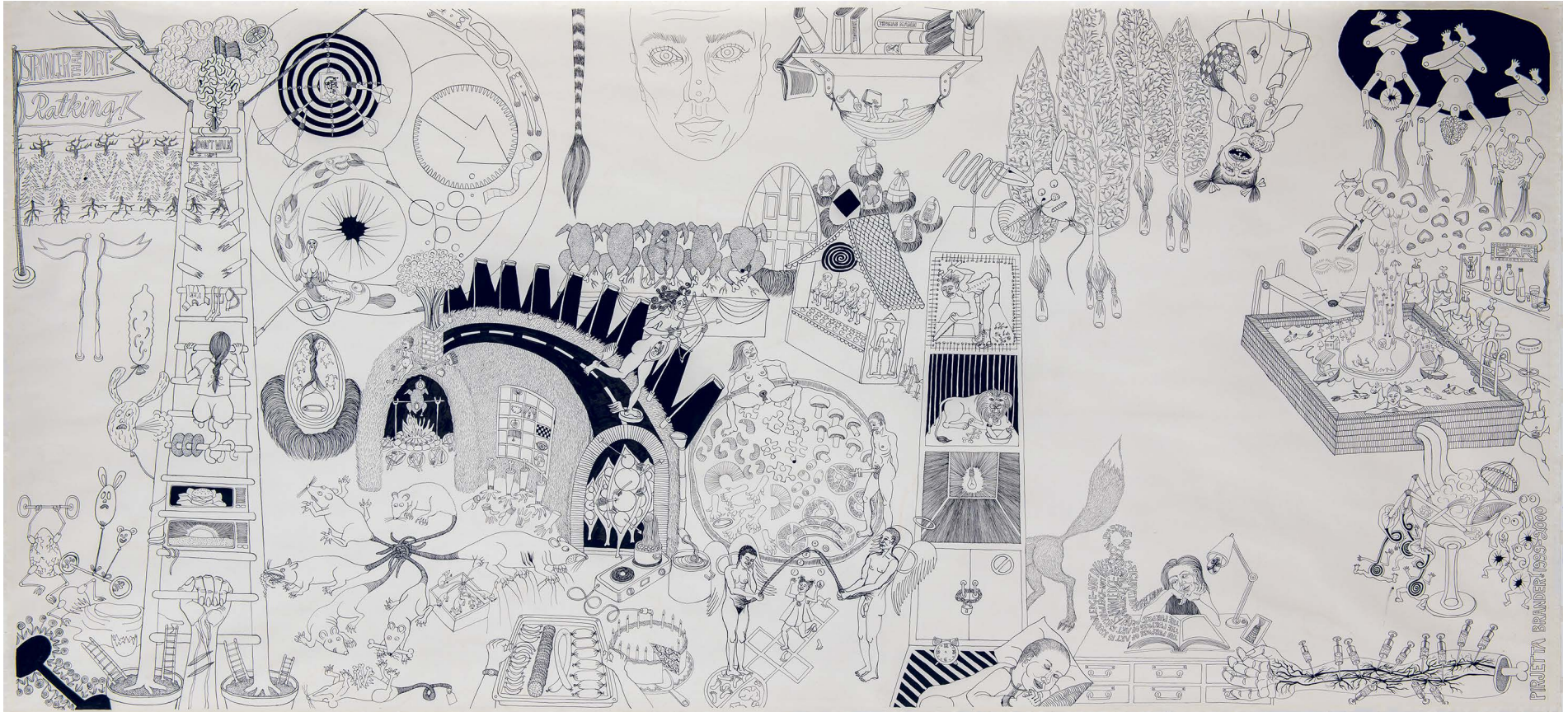
The main protagonist in your early drawings (*We* and *Paradise*) is a young woman not unlike yourself. Are they self-portraits?

PB

In those particular drawings, I used a character vaguely like myself as my model. I portray various things through myself, which is not the same thing as portraying myself.



Pirjetta Brander, *We*, 1996–1999, Indian ink on paper. Photo: Sampo Linkoneva.



LK

We (1996–1999) has been described as a key series in your oeuvre. It depicts a woman doing housework. The circular compositions evoke the repetitive monotony of how we perform the same routines from day to day, month to month. Household chores are never-ending – we wage a never-ending battle to remove dirt

and maintain order. *Cleaning Room I* and *II* are also related to housework and domestic settings.

Does the responsibility for creating a cosy family nest still fall to women in today's society? Have gender expectations changed since you did those drawings?

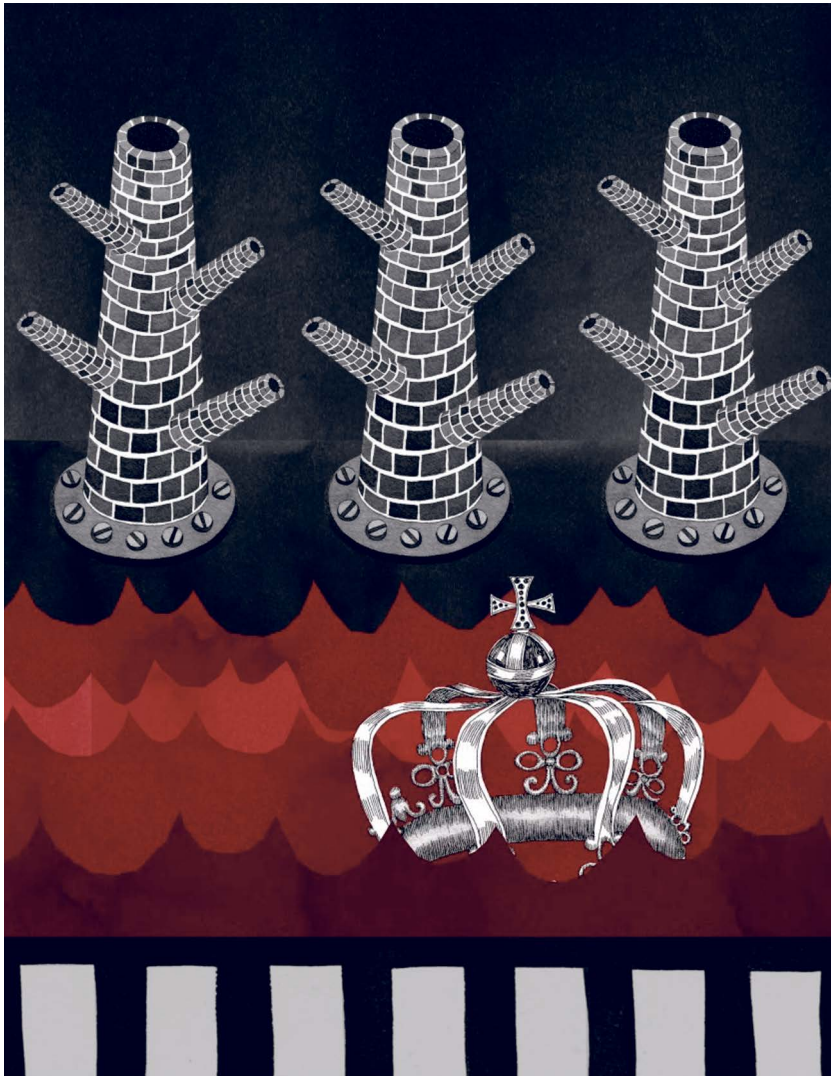
PB

If anything, social media is creating ever more unrealistic expectations. Women's private lives and bodies are subjected to constant scrutiny and negative commentary on a wholly unprecedented level.

Someone will always have to clean, cook, clothe and take care of the

family. Statistics indicate that this role more often than not falls to women. It is a nonstop task that entails hours of thinking, planning and physical labour, every single day. Furthermore, it is a job that requires quite an extensive skillset.

The core problem is that housework is not regarded as 'real' work.



Pirjetta Brander, *Garden. Contemporary Version of Paradise*, 2009, still image from animation.

It is assumed to happen by magic, as an afterthought alongside everything else.

No existing economic theory calculates the value of housework, and housework is ignored in GDP calculations. Society derives immense benefit from the unpaid hours of labour and care provided by women. What is more, society upholds the current gender-based division of labour through various mechanisms, so this is not just an individual problem. Even same-sex parents are forced into the same mould.

Outside this mould, there is no place and hence no value for women. There are no viable alternatives. Paradoxically, a woman's value derives from her input as an unpaid servant for her family, while the societal value of her work goes unacknowledged.

This is a significant political issue, even if people prefer not to recognize it as such.

LK

There is a scene in *We* that portrays a woman seated on a bed with her legs spread wide open and her splayed vulva directly facing the viewer. Why, even in the 2020s, is it still considered indecent to present female genitalia so directly?

PB

The female nude has been a classic subject in visual art through the ages.

With a single click, you can find considerably more graphic content than my drawing on any digital device. Why should fine art steer clear of subject matter that is perfectly commonplace in other contexts?

LK

In her autobiographical book *Things I Don't Want to Know*, **Deborah Levy** discusses the problem of confronting things she would prefer to know nothing about. In some of your work, you depict things that people might not really want to know or see. Has art helped you find a way to tolerate evil, cruelty and greed? What happens when you confront evil head-on?

PB

The philosopher **Hannah Arendt** writes about the banality of evil. Evil does not exist in a vacuum, separate from all other aspects of human existence. There is no such thing as absolute evil that you can identify and isolate from life. Evil touches all of us in one way or another. It is embedded in daily routines and practices, hierarchies, power mechanisms and economics, indifference and ignorance. When you understand how the world works, with the help of science and art, for example, it is easier to make choices that do not conflict with your personal morals.

LK

Your animation *Garden. Contemporary Version of Paradise* depicts three tree-like smokestacks with branches

Pirjetta Brander, *BallBall II*, 2019, pink marble. Photo: Pirjetta Brander.



that spew out the detritus of hyper-consumerism onto a conveyor belt: bottles, ice cream cones, sausages, doughnuts. Watching the piece, one cannot escape thinking about the vast mountains of food and commodities that we devour ceaselessly, burdening the planet. How do you feel about the environmental crisis and climate change?

PB
The Earth's climate has always been changing. It is an undeniable fact that the current climate emergency is the inevitable consequence of human actions. Many of those actions have had good intentions, such as improving the quality of people's lives. The truth is that our failure to halt climate change is due to people's reluctance to give up the high standard of living they enjoy – nor are they able to even imagine an alternative.

LK
How important is humour to you?

PB
Humour is a vital part of daily life. It shakes things up, turns everything on its head, and shows things from a fresh perspective. Humour is a crucial tool for an artist!

LK
There are also three sculptures in your exhibition. When and how did you begin sculpting?

PB
I began sculpting granite in 2015. I visited a stone carving workshop in Tamil Nadu, India, and I immediately felt drawn to the material. Excluding the years of the pandemic, I have returned to India every year to make granite sculptures. Most of them are on permanent display in my sculpture

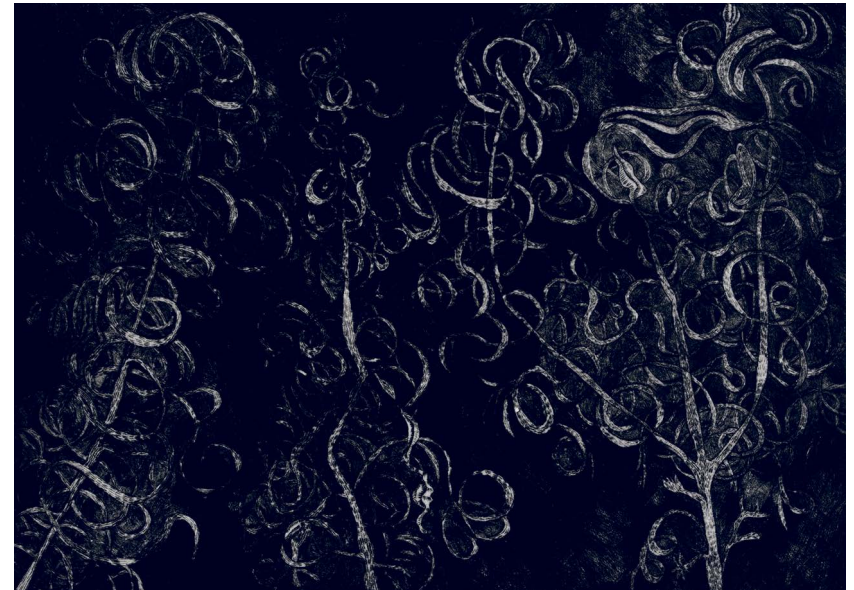
garden in Mänttä. Before stone, I sculpted fibreglass and concrete.

LK
In the *BallBall* series, a smaller ball grows inside a larger one. Does this convey a message of hope – is there something good growing inside the ball?

PB
When I am sculpting, all I think about is the form. I strive to create something unique that invents its own rules. *BallBall* basically portrays the same thing as all the other exhibits: endless movement, growth and change.

LK
Something new also appears to be growing in your series *Teeming Void*, which depicts plants with photographic accuracy. An untreated, light-reflective copper plate is not the easiest surface to draw on. The finished drawings demonstrate how new life literally bursts from a void. How does this series relate to Kari Aronpuro's 2010 poetry collection of the same name?

PB
I strive to achieve a similar impression of movement and abundance as Aronpuro does with his mycelium-like linking of words. Like Aronpuro, I want to cast a spell that conjures new life out of nothingness.



Pirjetta Brander, *Teeming Void V*, 2022, drypoint. Photo: Pirjetta Brander.

Photo: Sampo Linkoneva.





Detail of Rat King:

Brander's understanding of art's mission is summed up in a detail in *Rat King* (1999). The following words rise from the pages of an open book, assuming the shape of a human figure: "The purpose of art is knowledge – not diversion, pastime or transfiguration." The quote is from a lecture presented by **Max Beckmann** (1884–1950) at London's New Burlington Gallery in 1938.

Cover: Pirjetta Brander, *Cleaning Room 1*, 1998, Indian ink on paper.
Photo: Sampo Linkoneva.

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