



TOUR

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FORCE

RAPHAELLA

Portrait  
ILYA LIPKIN

VOGEL



At ease on a stage of her own creation, **RAPHAELA VOGEL** is waving to the boxes of history, and breaking them down. *Gesine Borchardt* makes a disordered, disquieting visit to the artist's studio of curios

**H**eavy metal thunders through the room. It roars and screeches—billowing, deafening, jarring—buttressed by a battering bass. The white prow of a speeding boat almost fills the screen, a blue sea and horizon stretching out behind. Whipping in the wind, brown tresses of hair trace shadows like thousands of skinny serpents onto the white surface, creating a breakneck tangle of drawings. Mirror images at the sides of the picture pull the prow together and give it the bizarre symmetry of a Rorschach test.

Clearly something has been unleashed, a crazed Melusine battling her demons. The idyllic image of a woman lounging on a boat at sea has been fractured. Raphaela Vogel called her video installation *Isolator*. Made up of a projector, a utility pole, and ceramic insulators, the massive piece was the highlight of her first major institutional solo show in 2018, when she transformed Basel's Kunsthalle into a poppy psychedelic space that, for all its sheer force, was also frailly futuristic. The Art Basel crowd immediately wondered just who this woman foregrounding herself so blatantly even was. For Vogel appears in most of her films—as a creature struggling onto land through turquoise-blue surf, wandering over rocky terrain, slipping through pipes or crawling between concrete walls, framed by luminous geometric patterns and the talons of a drone filming, attacking, or chasing her from above like some alien insect.

The background is always filled with hypnotic tones, splashing water, claustrophobic creaks, or the artist's own singing voice. Vogel's world is all about sparks flying through friction.

On this dark gray afternoon in Berlin's long Covid winter, her studio is damp and chilly, rain pelting the windows. The former backyard locksmith's shop in the Wedding district has ceilings at least 10 meters high, single-glazed windows, and feels like a time capsule from the industrious end of the 19th century, when all kinds of factories and workshops were popping up in this area of the German capital. Today, wearing FFP2 masks, we're seated in a maelstrom of clothes, boxes, and flea market finds, amid overflowing pots of silicone soup and kitschy yard sculptures of lions and putti. An installation of hand-scribbled animal skins hangs from the trusses above. In the middle of all this, Rollo, the artist's enormous white royal poodle, pads around like he's really a person wearing a dog suit. It all feels a bit like the studio of J. F. Sebastian, the replicant designer in the original *Blade Runner*.

Vogel's jeans are cinched well above the hips, and she's wearing high boots with wedge heels. Her large eyes stand out on her pale, unadorned face, her brown mane tamed by a woolen headband emblazoned with a rhinestone. She's just as conspicuously eccentric and alluring as her work, which has been all the buzz since she arrived in Berlin five years ago. Her time studying at Frankfurt's Städelschule may seem distant now, but it forms the cornerstone of her practice. The film with which she graduated under Peter Fischli shows the artist from above, wrapped in fabric, whirling across a narrow room and shrieking through billowing curtains like a banshee, only to end up standing on a heater, her long legs planted wide as she guides a flashing drone through the space. The rhythm, the distortion, and the brisk sensuality of her later work—all of it was already clearly present.

Faced with an overflowing desk, Vogel first balances her laptop on her knees, then she puts it on a huge dusty pair of bellows. A three-meter-high 3D scanner sticks out behind her like a futuristic cabin strewn with camera eyes. She's using it to photograph visitors with musical instruments in order to make a film for a train station in Geneva. The work in progress looks like a digitally remixed collage from the early days of MTV, with lines culled from the artist's teenage break-up letters streaming over the top. Teen romance, pop music, and squawky props, all translated through recent tech developments: Vogel has created an energetic and highly contemporary visual language that, while immediately recognizable, is constantly transforming and evolving. So much so, in fact, that at the age of 32 she's already appeared at some of Europe's finest venues. Basel was followed by the Haus der Kunst in Munich, the Berlinische Galerie, and the entire Kunsthau Bregenz. An artist who manages this and still keeps growing, as Vogel does, has not only secured their place in today's art world, but in tomorrow's art history.

ISOLATOR, 2016, video with sound, 12:02 min, mixed media, 652 x 588 x 588 cm. Exhibition view, ULTRANACKT, Kunsthalle Basel, 2018  
Precarious Sprawl, HOCHBETT, (still), 2016, video with sound, 6:06 min







SON OF AWITCH, 2018, mixed media, 550 × 910 × 2,000 cm. Exhibition view, Berhnische Galerie  
Precious spreads: Video stills, work in progress for Geneva's new Léman Express train station

In this light, it's almost astonishing when she tells me: "I was always very shy. As an only child living in a village, I was alone a lot and fixated on my mom's loud presence. I felt constrained." Vogel isn't the kind of person who has an answer ready for any question, just as she never forces a fixed concept onto her art. However obsessive she depicts herself in her films, in real life she is reserved—or at least part of her is. "When I was 16, I dropped out of school and went to Berlin, but only for a year. Then I went back and moved to a nurses' home in Erlangen. It's 'cause my mother is a nurse." At 19, she started art school in Nuremberg, where she'd find her way into a world all her own. "I started with painting. But I didn't like canvas. I don't like touching dry fabric." One day, a shopkeeper gave the artist 200 goat skins she no longer had any use for. They lay around in Vogel's studio for a while, but at some point she realized they were exactly the material she needed. "I painted the skins, shaped them into triangles, and inserted a ring made of molded plastic at the bottom, a kind of bone, or a prosthesis." Since then, goat, horse, and elk skins soaked in paint and covered in writing have been a constant in Vogel's work, guarding her films and installations like ghostly sentinels. "Leather already carries a lot of meaning, yet not a lot of art-historical baggage. It's archaic and animalistic—the image is charged before I even start painting. And it's also controversial. It's a *precarious* material, just like plastic."

Raphaela Vogel speaks softly but convincingly. "I like topics that are heavily laden, that raise major questions that I can then implement in some baroque way. The myth of Arachne, for example—I've taken up spiders again and again in very different forms. Or I use vanitas motifs, for example when I made a skeleton slowly ride a carousel under a weeping willow." In the film installation *Fuge meam propinquitatem!* (Flee my proximity!), a skeleton holds a piece of glass inscribed with the title, flicking it like a clock's second hand while a recording plays of the artist reciting an ancient text on atomic theory in Latin. This may all sound convoluted, but Vogel's imagery is so consistently haunting that explanations really aren't necessary.

Or maybe they are. For a while, she drove around with her father's tombstone in the back of her old VW van. She kept it under a blanket so she wouldn't have to answer any questions when she had friends along for the ride. Then she decided to include it in her 2016 exhibition at the Westfälischer Kunstverein, where it was placed under the yellowed old IKEA loft bed from her childhood, the whole thing surrounded with black and red trim so it looked like an altar. A video played on a monitor nearby: a journey through an empty landscape lined with flashing digital abstractions, through concrete tunnels and a church in ruins. Carved in stone, a huge figure of a saint appears like a patriarch closing his eyes in pain. "I was almost five when my father died. They told me it happened on a



HIJJAB HUND, 2019  
Oil pen, oil, varnish, goatskin, polyester fabric, 236 × 186 cm

beach in Spain," Vogel says, "but my aunt said he wasn't dead at all. We were given a death certificate and an urn, but there was always this uncertainty." Her parents had just separated—her father, a sailor, was married three or four times, and his relatives urged him not to leave another wife, as their mortgage wasn't yet paid off. "But he wanted to start a company in Africa, and then there was his life insurance." What really happened is still unclear. Up until the last minute, Vogel wondered whether she should use the stone she picked up after his grave was cleared. But the title of her exhibition, *She Shah*, ultimately played on this extreme self-centeredness: "she" is at the center, and so is "shah," meaning king, or, rather, queen. The exhibition did in fact feature a *shisha*—the water pipe that's also a symbol for male homosociality—only Vogel transformed it into a tentacled creature topped with a projector screening the journey through the ruins onto a tattered piece of cloth. It is held by a metallic mermaid—there it is again, the motif of the sea, and, of course, that of the female form—the artist drawing from ancient myths, strange materials, and recent tech to transform them into a very peculiar universe.



ROLLO, 2019, mixed media, various dimensions  
Exhibition view BELLEND BIN ICH AUFGEWACHT  
Kunsthau Bregenz, 2019–20

Vogel's installations form cycles that are intuitively composed, unreal, distorted—and yet, as a result, they are all the more coherent. The enigmatic, powerful imagery is reminiscent of the rituals in Matthew Barney's *Cremaster* films, in which the artist, half human, half mythical creature, climbs through elevator shafts or moves through futuristically lit spaces, sometimes wearing a leather apron, sometimes dandy-esque orthopedic wear, dragging and jerking his astral body into an immersive emotional landscape. But the pull of Vogel's work does not only stem from her use of instinct, of the body. As obscure as her images may seem, she chooses them consciously. Behind all the twisted tales and hypnotic effects, she has embedded a narrative, stylistic, and technical symbolism that seems fundamental, vulnerable, and above all profoundly human—and it extends far beyond the zeitgeist of our digital era.

But how does this young artist manage to exert such an all-enveloping physicality, and how does she stay so totally independent in the process? "It's got a lot to do with the fact that I grew up in the countryside. Animals are important, and

there's a close relationship to the body," Vogel says. "The organic and the medical have always fascinated me. As a child, my mother took me to a children's museum in Fulda, where they'd constructed these massive plastic models of organs you could walk through." Gunther von Hagens's *Body Worlds* show also left a lasting impression—afterwards Vogel bought a tight body suit with muscles printed on it. At the end of *Isolator*, she's walking through a mountain landscape while her own somewhat off-key cover of the countrypolitan classic "The Most Beautiful Girl" plays in the distance—an absurd allusion to the story of Marsyas, who challenged the god Apollo in a contest of music only to be skinned when he lost.

With her dystopian fervor, but also with her trust in that unnameable quality most people lose when they outgrow childhood, Vogel contradicts the current image of the "post-internet" generation as aloof and dispassionate. She shows that digital animations, organic polyurethane shapes, and ready-mades can be transformed into a cosmos that's intelligent and playful—not to mention funny. Her video installation at the Berlinische Galerie in 2019 was called *Son of a Witch*, and it had Vogel lounging in a circular bed that, from the top-down perspective of a camera attached to a metal rod and controlled by the artist, looked like a combination of a clock's dial and a condom—then Vogel pushed her butt up, slapping it like a rapper in a music video and looking rather sumptuous in slow motion and the distortion of the wide-angle lens. In her most recent works, she distorts her image fairly often, courtesy of her 360-degree camera, the result of which is silly and not ostentatiously profound, as often happens when artists turn their cameras onto themselves.

Now, it's no longer only Vogel we see. Rollo has become an alter ego of sorts. The white poodle leaps through her films, shakes himself off, and even inspires titles, such as that of the show in Bregenz: *Bellend bin ich aufgewacht* (I woke up barking). In the exhibition, amid weathered models of macho monuments, like victory columns and triumphal arches, Vogel's video installations were positioned between casts of lion sculptures, elk skins, and giant spiders made of metal rods and plastic, the Zumthor-designed building becoming a surreal amusement park that offered the visitor's mind no clear exit. It is with this mixture of mature megalomania and youthful imagination that the artist so nonchalantly reins in her audience.

In Berlin, Rollo brooks no such leash. He jumps straight out of the studio, through the rain, and into the old VW van illegally parked out front. In the dark, it's a bit hard to tell which of the wild-haired pair is behind the wheel, turning the ignition key, and driving toward Kreuzberg like a sleepwalker. But what does it matter? Raphaela Vogel's journey will be long, and it's only just begun.



ROLLO (stills), 2019, video with sound, 6:21 min

