

December 15th, 2022

Artist Talk with artist Stephanie Imbeau and writer, curating researcher and editor Wilma Lukatsch

Wilma Lukatsch (WM): *As a person being in the world, traveling around, being thrown in, and moving out- all of this is often combined with not-so-easy circumstances. I think this is a perfect moment to share this kind of imperfection in terms of the temperature and the conditions we are in and I would like to introduce you all to Stephanie, through her processing and imagining, as well as to the interactions between yourself, Stephanie, and the world, and between your hand and your crafting and the world.*

We are here in Bärenzwinger and it truly is a special place for exhibiting works of art. Bärenzwinger was, for quite some time, a home for a bear couple. With this comes a very symmetrical situation concerning the architecture of this cage and the idea of them being showcased to both Berliners and visitors.

You are showing several works in this exhibit which are about the dimensions of what “home” is, a certain longing and searching, as well as offering a kind of skin and skin-thinking, in addition to one's own, let's say. The works here offer, in some way, sorts of protections. But, they also come with ideas of masquerades. The exhibition is a layering of skins: walking skins, possibly able to travel with us, being on the way with us; embracing, connecting, and detaching worlds through their shapes, colors, or structures. They are rooms and architectures, but ones that enable us to walk through the world with them when we like or need them. So, we have this work here installed high up under the ceiling: houses made of fabric which can be lowered and put on. I hope by condensing our talking and sitting here under them, that we could activate at least one of the houses of this work which you have titled Procession.

Procession consists of five houses of white and gold, which people can go inside and wear like a dress. You get a belt on the hip and you are protected inside, therefore you just can walk around with it. And, always close to your work, is the reality that they can be folded together, be compressed, and are able to travel around with you/us. I really like this as a “door” to think along this work, but also other of your works. Because the works might change by being compressed, stored, and traveling around. We never know in that sense how time is treating them, the material, etc.

Then additionally you are doing films and photographs as part of the physical installations which are accompanying [and/or archiving] your works. This is often the case when producing a series, I have the feeling. We see in the small room to our left more houses which also are also called Procession, but extended as Procession (Interiors). I really hope that we all just stand up whenever we like, go into this room, and enter the houses in there. Because these Interiors are offering something similar and yet still very different. Stepping into them one can experience different sensualities of fabrics, colors, and skin situations. Please everybody feel free anytime to exit our talk and walk through the exhibition.

And lastly, there is one work I did not have the chance to have a closer look at when we met for the first-time last week. It is a work outside, untitled so far. It offers an outer structure of a potential and future architecture, and, at this point, I think it would be nice to hear your voice:

How did you start to work on the notions and materialities of “housing” and “skinning”? Why is it so necessary to work with this certain kind of, not ephemeral, but rather lucid inviting idea-based but

still intense and heavy-handcraft-process? Your other works show this kind of intensity concerning practice as well, which use hands, and the sensuality and sensation that comes with it, as you pointed out once. So how did all these things come together here?

These questions are very openly formulated, meant as an invitation, to start wherever you would like to think and speak about.

Stephanie Imbeau (SI): *I have to start by saying everything you say is just super great. And you're the second person who I've consciously noted who has said "the second skin", the other person is sitting right there (points at Evgenija Wassilew). I find that that reference really resonates.*

To answer your question about how all these things came together, I could start from the beginnings of the wearable houses, which consciously became a project when I was preparing to go to a residency in the Arctic. Or I could start with practicing laying really, really, really flat under a bed sheet when I was a child thinking I could, if something were to go wrong, I could just disappear under a sheet.

The starting point is shifting, as is the ending point, for all of my works, which sort of wind together. You're right though, it's all tied in with using my hands and also feeling this idea of needing some sort of extra layer of imaginary protection and imaginary security. As a kid, I think I probably did believe I could just make myself not-visible. Now there's an understanding that these [fabric layers] don't protect, and yet they feel very necessary. And that's the thing, in the studio if I'm not using my hands, I just don't know what to do. So I feel in the studio when I'm making whatever I am making, that's where there is security. There are no mistakes. There's just the work.

WL: *If we are now imagining this together with the works that you decided to show in this exhibition, we have, for one, the houses for wearing and walking outside. But then you have the houses inside the house. So you have within the Procession works also kind of layers and different skins and skinning. As if our "houses" and our idea of houses as architecture are also not trustworthy and we would need more than one skin, like layers of skin. Insofar, what can we experience through the neighborhood and proximity of both of these Procession works – the exterior and the interior houses? Is it the first time that both series are shown so close to each other?*

SI: *Sort of. I was very fortunate to have a brief solo show in Serbia, in the Cultural Center of Belgrade's Podroom Gallery, where there were three wearable houses from Procession on display. They were in their own little room. Procession (Interiors) was also there, but the two installations were very far apart, separated by video and other things.*

It feels very strange but appropriate for the houses to be in close proximity here in the Baerenzwinger. I guess maybe because the cages are in close proximity. The bears were also in close proximity to the neighborhood, which is so strange.

The works developed because of each other or mostly this one Shifts(Procession) was first and then this one [Procession (Interiors)] came very much because of it, and an experience of not wearing it, but being inside of the layers and feeling a sense of relief when the fabric closed around me, even though I lived alone. Noticing the impact of that moment of relief and my curiosity led me to make these houses that are not wearable, but enterable.

So there's this idea that Procession feels more like an exterior and Procession (Interiors) is the interior. So it makes sense that they're here in this sort of fluid architectural space, which is so strange and interesting. This history is also ongoing.

WL: *Another layer between these two works also comes with the use of colors. Here we have the white and the gold, so very...*

SI: *Ceremonial?*

WL: *... yes, ceremonial, heavy loaded colors and color combinations, also concerning the shapes of the golden structures. And in the interior houses, you have not more joyful colors but rather...*

SI: *more play.*

WL: *... more play and also a shift from a white-golden symbolic gravity to the experience of color and light, both concerning the fabric and the light situation. Inside every house, there is also a light of a certain color. So, there seems to be an urge to move from this kind of reduced and sacral color scheme to a more colorful and/or playful variety of colors. Is there something more to it, why do you choose to go in that direction?*

SI: *I'm an impulse-first maker. I make and then I figure it out later. Thomas Heatherwick actually said that about his work once, and I loved the term "post-rationalization". I like that idea because there's this impulse I have to make these houses and I'm always chasing the "why".*

The white and gold [color scheme] came because the houses started in porcelain, which is a material that is very close to my heart. And it is a naturally white material. The gold came in because there is often a use of gold in conjunction with porcelain, and also because I was playing with symbolism and the use of gold as an assertion of value. But then the colors came in [with regards to Procession (Interiors)], for which I think maybe there are two reasons. One is because of comfort levels and comfort layers and playing with the idea of how a color field can maybe influence a psychological experience of space. But [on a] very, very low level. I'm not a science-based artist. And then I also think maybe it was just time... I have this body of work where I use umbrellas and light that I haven't worked with for a number of years and I think it was just time to start finding my way again with color in a different language. And it is an exploration of dyeing the fabrics. Most of the fabrics don't want to be dyed because they're water-resistant. Tyvek, for instance, is not something you typically dye. And so the colors are unexpected. Some of the fabrics are more traditional, there's a mix, but that's also the exploration of how the dyes actually came out. I think I needed a reintroduction of color into my work and, who knows, maybe slowly somehow that's going to come back into the ceramics.

WL: *Why I am also coming to this point is because there are videos from you of the houses enacted. And there, we often experience a special light situation as well, a sunset and such, or a certain color of the air or concerning the background. Also, sometimes there are some greenish things, and then depending on the light of the atmosphere, the white is not white anymore and the gold seems not gold in a way. So you have a lot of colors in these videos and I thought that was interesting. And in one of these videos, there is a very blueish/greenish color situation during an enacted walking procession of the white houses. This is one thing, and the other thing came when I watched the video again this afternoon. Because all of the sudden I started laughing when I saw the enacted procession of the houses. Because you have the walking houses, and each time when a little bit of wind or movement comes in, all these things and skins are floating and reacting. Sometimes it is very sacred, but*

sometimes also just “stupid”, so I really started to laugh and wondered, if this is something you experienced, also as a kind of a relief? Because of the gravity one might feel being confronted with all these Catholic... I don't know, grave ideas of the world and the divisions made. But then all of a sudden it became something more joyous and embracing because it felt beyond being sacred or being... whatever, divisions between us.

SI: Completely, 100%. It's all mixed together. I actually like the idea of “sacredly stupid” or “stupidly sacred”. I find it difficult to abandon any kind of dialectic, any kind of balance. Because life is sacred. And it's also very stupid. And it's also silly and it's also super sad and everything is kind of smushed up together. And the way I work is always ongoing and evolving. And I think I would feel like I'd be lying if I tried to push away the humor, the stupidity, or try to push away the times when I do get quite serious. So it makes it very hard to define, but I love the balance: How it can just kind of wobble between the two on a knife-edge.

WL: So there is a beautiful image in one of the films: There are five houses sitting in a boat and you have an arctic scenery in the background, epic. [laughing] You have these sacral-topsy and fragile-looking houses sitting in a rubber boat. I mean, all this really is something very touching in terms of the human size, especially when there are, in the background, these massive mountains, and the tragedy also within this worldly scenery. And maybe this brings us back to this space where we are here and now. We also are facing a certain tragic... historical tragedy here because, until today, people are still coming and looking for the bear couple! And this brings me now to the work I have not put enough attention to – the work outside in the former outside enclosure for the bears. Could you please, before we walk outside, say something around that work?

SI: Yes, so outside... I find the architecture of this building really interesting. It's so strange. To me, it really looks like a boat has just landed in the park because it's got these symmetrical, oval, balcony-type enclosures that are surrounded by motes, and then there's a hedge, and then the park. So it's separate and not, which I like a lot, blurring boundaries. In both enclosures, there's a mote, a platform, and a little bit of nature. And there are these square concrete pools. And when we had our first meeting here with another artist, I was taken by the fact that I felt like these pools, when empty, invited a sitting area. They are maybe a half-meter deep. And it just seemed like a kind of seventies sunken living room vibe so, of course, I wanted to suspend a house over one of these pools. It became clear rather quickly that trying to figure out how to hoist a new house quite high up in the air wasn't actually in the realm of the reality of this project. But what was possibly more interesting, or more honest to the origin of this space, is that [working on developing a house for the outside] could be this kind of public trial and error. Sort of how the bears, by living their lives, became a passive spectacle. This project, as it slowly develops and gets fine-tuned and/or finished, is also becoming a sort of passive spectacle.

And I also liked that it plays with the symmetry a little bit in that, ultimately, along with the wearable houses of Procession, I like the idea that they will be worn around out on the other enclosure. So there will be these kinds of moving, strange, sacred, silly houses on one side and then there's this larger who-knows-what communal larger house presence on the other. The dialog is in the frames, which are made by attaching alloy rods to specially designed joints made so that they can be packed away and transported. They were designed by a product designer named Nils Fisher. Because of this design, there is a specific geometry. And then within that geometry, I can play with the scale. So the houses vary in size and material, but there's a kinship in the geometry.

I'm looking forward to a time when I go across the park and look to see these houses that belong together, but are different and doing different things.

WL: *Maybe we should really go outside now. I think this is a good moment.*

[the talk proceeds outside to the skeleton of the Communal House in the Garden]

SI: *So, there is a lot to figure out. You can come into the pool basin if you want.*

WL: *This work is an ongoing process within the time of the exhibition?*

SI: *Yes, during the time of the exhibition we will be constructing... I say "we" because I will be doing it as an open thing every Thursday afternoon, starting in January, constructing a draped fabric enclosure, a bit like the rest of the houses, but this one will have its own character. And for instance, because I really do like this idea of being able to sit around the edges., we're thinking about making fabric panels that can extend from the roof so that we have elements that can move and shift and maybe play with the space in the center like it's really to be continued.*

WL: *And through that, it seems obvious that it will be a surprise for you as well. So, you are open not only concerning the audience but to yourself, and giving yourself the freedom also to see what reality offers or not.*

SI: *And I feel astonishingly fortunate to be able to have this chance to do this. I mean, look around us. It's super weird. We are in the middle of Berlin Mitte across from the Märkisches Museum. I feel very fortunate to have that.*

WL: *What is very beautiful about that is, that every Thursday afternoon people can see you around, working outside, and join if they would like.*

SI: *I like the idea that there are individuals that come by a lot and there are some that don't. But it's on view in such a way that you don't even have to come in. (...) And the fact that it could just be, if not my best work ever, it could be really publicly not my best work. And I don't want that, but it could happen.*

WL: *One more thing, because under these conditions here it is really a challenge to think about home, and especially the fabrics are not warm in themselves even if they are used as insulation. When I wore one of the houses here some days ago, it was not very warm inside, no? And now that we have really quite a cold time, your works and the exhibition are really brave as they are asking a lot from us in terms of thinking about warmth and about constructing homes and houses with these materials.*

SI: *Honestly, that's a really valid and challenging point. And I mean right now there's just a psychological warmth at least with Procession (Interiors, Winter). Physical warmth is a challenge in that there's a reason that I'm only going to be using Tyvek in this outside house because of wind risk and weight, and also the freezing. I did a freezer test for the houses I took to the Arctic, where I got a lot of different fabrics wet and then put them in the freezer. And so what happened was some of the heavier, warmer fabrics didn't do well when they were wet and frozen. But it is a challenge. And so I started thinking, maybe there's an opportunity for putting the warmth underneath.*

WL: I know from artist friends who had projects in Siberia that people who are working on a market are using Styrofoam plates, very thick ones to stand on. This is obviously the best way to make a separation between the cold of the ground and the warmth of ones body. But maybe we should move inside again.

[The talk moves to the entry room where a video is screened of a person wearing one of the Procession wearable houses]

WL: Let us go into the entry room where it is warmer and where we are screening one of your videos for tonight's talk.

There is one last thing I would like to say before we can think about if some of us would like to wear a house and go outside, which I really would recommend. Concerning the title Procession, and with having this nice relief moment I told you about, I felt enabled to stumbled differently over the title. I thought about "Procession" as more transgressive because, at first, it was very connected to all these church ideas of sacrality and the holy processions during the course of the religious year. But then I thought about it as a central aspect of life: "processing process". "Procession" then is also something that is beyond the church or religious practice but it is also about the reality and experience of simply: to process things. My body simply needs to process a cup of water, or I don't know what. Anything I take into my body or brain, I need to process, any idea or book, any talk or dream we have. We need to process it, and this dimension could also be part of your work Procession and the potential layers of home and housing. And we further could move on to Procession (Interiors) and Procession (Interiors, Vigil), a third work of this series, no?

SI: So, actually this one is titled Procession (Interiors, Winter). Procession (Interiors, Vigil) was the one in Serbia. It felt to me like they were looking outward. These are the six colorful houses. But what was your question?

WL: It was connected to the title and the way one gets invited through Procession as a serial work to also think about the dimensions of how and what Procession might be connected within each of our daily lives and walking through times and landscapes, spaces, histories.

SI: Yeah. I like that so much that you said that because it is... you're just processing as it happens. You need time to reflect and think. And also, I was talking with a friend at the opening about how humans just have this strange capacity to kind of circle around things and edge boundaries, or just make these funny walks, and there is something there that I'm just sort of scratching at, but not in a serious way or not really rigorously. I'm just processing through in my impulse-craft-forward method. And I really like that you said that processing.

WL: This lastly brings me to an aspect of several of your works, namely they are all [or quite some of them at least] embedded in series and in serial thinking I would call it. As such, they all give way towards "another themselves" and to a [more than one] potential future which is such a joyful aspect to think and work further along. Because it is that an art practice and method of not making a dot at the end of the sentence, but more a semicolon, and this simply is beautiful because it can go on and on as it relieves yourself towards potential meetings, talks, situations. So thank you Stephanie for this. I think we can go on speaking, but I assume it is also nice to just give us the freedom to walk or leave or whatever. Thank you a lot for coming everybody.

SI: Thank you so much for speaking, these are very beautiful insights.

