

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Johanna Fateman, "Birgit Jürgenssen," *Artforum*, November 6, 2014

ARTFORUM

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Birgit Jürgenssen

FERGUS MCCAFFREY | NEW YORK

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Birgit Jürgenssen, *Untitled (Horse)*, 1973,
paper mache, hair, tulle, velvet cushion, 24 x 25
1/2 x 6 1/4".

Starting a fire by striking a man's face—is it a feminist idea? *Match-bust*, 1973, looks like a big matchstick with a human head for a tip. It's twenty inches tall, but still you can imagine dragging it along a brick wall or a curb, rubbing off the nose and brow to get a light. This poetic piece by Birgit Jürgenssen (1949–2003) is one of a handful of early, Surrealist-influenced sculptures grouped in the center of the gallery. Another great one, *Untitled (Horse)*, 1973, looks like a child's hobbyhorse—except that a wavy dick sticks up from the seat of its hand-sewn velvet saddle. The phallic horse is echoed in a later work, *Unicorn*, 1991, a grid of photos that includes images of a table-saw blade, a solarized flower, and a serious woman posing in a unicorn costume. Most of the works on view are from the 1980s and 1990s, and employ experimental photographic processes: Jürgenssen painted with developer and fixer, scratched her prints, and used multiple exposures, photograms, and cyanotype in her dark, dreamy compositions.

She is best known for her participation in the Austrian feminist art movement of the 1970s. Along with her contemporaries, Jürgenssen protested art-world sexism and made works such as the iconic *Housewives' Kitchen Apron*, 1975, for which she photographed herself burdened by a cartoonish oven around her neck. None of her mid-1970s pieces that so explicitly attack gender strictures are included in this exhibition, and the accompanying press release notes with ambivalence that the artist's feminist reputation may have overwritten the complexity of her oeuvre. It's sobering to consider that this aspect of her artistic-political identity might constrain an understanding of her diverse practice. This smart estate show provides a sampling not of "feminist art" but rather a sampling of three decades of elegantly caustic work by an overlooked feminist artist.

— Johanna Fateman