

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Laura Cumming, "Rosemarie Trockel: A Cosmos – review," *The Guardian*, February 16, 2013.

Rosemarie Trockel: A Cosmos – review

Serpentine Gallery, London



Rosemarie Trockel's upside-down palm tree, *Untitled Plastic*, 2011 at the Serpentine.
Photograph: David Levene

There is a giant crab in the Serpentine Gallery, a metre from claw to claw. It sits on a heap of knitted blankets like some outlandish version of the princess and the pea. Nearby, two beetles perform a ballet on film. A snake coils like convolvulus around the stem of a tuber, and inside a dark cabinet of dead flowers and thistle-down lies a petrified hand, as if the gardener has passed away too. It feels like the little shop of horrors.

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This is the Serpentine as you have never seen it: stuffed to the rafters with more than 200 exhibits. There are exquisite glass sea creatures and marvellous birds assembled out of soot, string and cardboard. There are miniature books densely inked with drawings of camels and dogs, and a huge print of a flamingo bent double like some freakish hairpin.



Lucky Devil, 2012 by Rosemarie Trockel (installation view). Photograph: David Levene

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Objects and images twine and proliferate (more convoluted), and one senses a subtle web of connections developing promisingly before one's eyes, until it is abruptly breached by the image of a bristling tarantula. This has been superimposed on the female genitals in a reproduction of Courbet's famous painting, *The Origin of the World*, to make the flesh crawl and probe the mind's eye. This is coarse, melodramatic and about as false a note as that Halloween hand – and both, alas, are by Rosemarie Trockel; whereas the others are all by fellow artists or mother nature. There are many marvels in Trockel's Cosmos, to be sure, but none are actually by her.

Trockel is an influential German artist in her 60s, probably best known for those knitted blankets which incorporated controversial logos – the Playboy bunny, the nuclear symbol – to make political art out of women's work. Such gestures are time-tied, and the opening room of this show is a period piece to the 70s: a glum library of pamphlets, draft books, wilfully weak drawings, sardonic collages and other works on paper. They look like study aids, and indeed one has to study them to get the tenor of what follows.

That sketch of a chimp making a sketch will later come to fruition in three paintings by a real chimp that look like pastiche abstract expressionism (what else?). That snapshot of old ladies deep in their knitting – tartly captioned "Permanent Installation" – is a presage of all the many wool works to come later.

Some of these are the work of Judith Scott, an artist born stone deaf with Down's syndrome, whose wool-wrapped objects – nameless forms heavily bound in worsted and twist – speak of a powerful inner world. They somewhat overshadow Trockel's own wool paintings, abstracts made using only a warp or a weft to suggest coloured stripes, dark drawings or tremulous interference. But perhaps that was Trockel's intention.

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Untitled, 1989 by Judith Scott: her 'wool wrapped objects speak of a powerful inner world'. Photograph: David Levene

Similarly, she displays her own watercolours of seed heads bursting open to some disadvantage alongside the ferocious botanical art of the 18th-century painter [Maria Sibylla Merian](#). Merian depicted plums and sweet potatoes whole, but also dissected like human bodies, their innards appallingly exposed. They are the very definition of cruel beauty.

This intermingling ought to work. Trockel has always avoided anything so conventional as a style, so she can match her own work to many other media. Alongside the preserved crab are her stuffed birds, twitching in their mechanised aviary to a recording of their own song. Next to John James Audubon's bizarre [flamingo](#) are her own dark and knotted prints.

Perhaps this is an act of humility, a flouting of the retrospective tradition in which every work is there to the further glory of a single artist. It is certainly true that *Rosemarie Trockel: A Cosmos* presents many other names, among them the self-taught bird collagist [James Castle](#), and the camera-man [Ladislaw Starewicz](#) who made the quaint beetle film in 1912.

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But this cosmos is very much her own. Trockel is interested in the grotesque: a mask with the nose umbilically connected to a placenta; a skull with a Pinocchio nose; a severed leg the colour of lead standing upright in a gilded cabinet. The last is, of course, her own work.

Although there are recent sculptures that look like squashy meteorites, most of the art by Trockel takes the form of late-flowering surrealism. She has a palm tree hanging upside down from the ceiling and a coffee table on which another severed leg is laid like an objet d'art (good joke). She has a filthy bluebottle landing on the cheek of a newborn in its pristine cot, which goes for the old one-two surrealist punch while remaining fairly preposterous.



Fly me to the moon, 2011 by Rosemarie Trockel in collaboration with Günter Weseler (installation detail): 'the old one-two surrealist punch'. Photograph: Jerry Hardman-Jones

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And the difficulty is that her works are too obvious to merge with the rest. The needful camouflage simply isn't there. So that the chain of allusions and associations is frequently broken, which doesn't seem much to the point. Not that there is an evident point to all this: in fact it feels quite the reverse. Trockel is not attempting to elaborate any particular idea. This is not a show like [Mark Wallinger's](#) great anthology for the Hayward, [The Russian Linesman](#), with its philosophical musings on thinking and drawing, or [Grayson Perry's](#) wonderful [celebration of past art](#) at the British Museum. It is more like one enormous consciousness-raising exercise, a setting forth of curious phenomena from the human and natural world.

Its impact is in the garrulous communication going on between the exhibits: between spiders and webs, knitting and knotting, talons and claws, feathers and brushes, between humans and their monkey surrogates. Between the febrile intensity of surrealism and the surreal avidity of early botanical paintings, between feminist and outsider art. The result is dramatic but inscrutable, beautiful but dark, alarming but sporadically uninvolved. If such an object existed it could appear here as emblem of this show: namely, a curate's egg.