

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Skye Sherwin, "Gernot Wieland on the couch," *ArtReview*, Summer 2018

ArtReview

Gernot Wieland on the couch



UK £6.50



Bruce Nauman on the fence

Plus Luc Tuymans, Mexican Macabre, Susan Cianciolo

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Birgit Jürgenssen *Nocturnal Light*

Alison Jacques Gallery, London 17 April – 19 May

That transformation was a lifelong concern. For the late Austrian artist Birgit Jürgenssen is apparent in her recently reappraised work from the 1970s: high heels emerge like weaponised nipples from unexpected places on her body, vaginas sprout in the crevices of books and shoes morph into animals. This tamer of the artist's output from the 1980s and 90s, however, reveals how her direct takes on female identity and metamorphosis evolved into something dreamier and more abstract. The suffering housewives of her earlier drawings, photos and performances are replaced by shape-shifters, as in a swirling New Age-y painting of a moon goddess (in *Three women of nocturnal light* (Kunst, Wien, Triel), 1987) and a photo-dyptych of crumpled fabric shining like molten gold (*Umwelt*, 1988).

This diverse body of work is united by its nocturnal atmosphere. Scenes in paintings and photographs are illuminated by milky moonlight or amber dawn, or more often by the harsh electric lighting that gives shadows, deeply that fills noir its identity. This makes

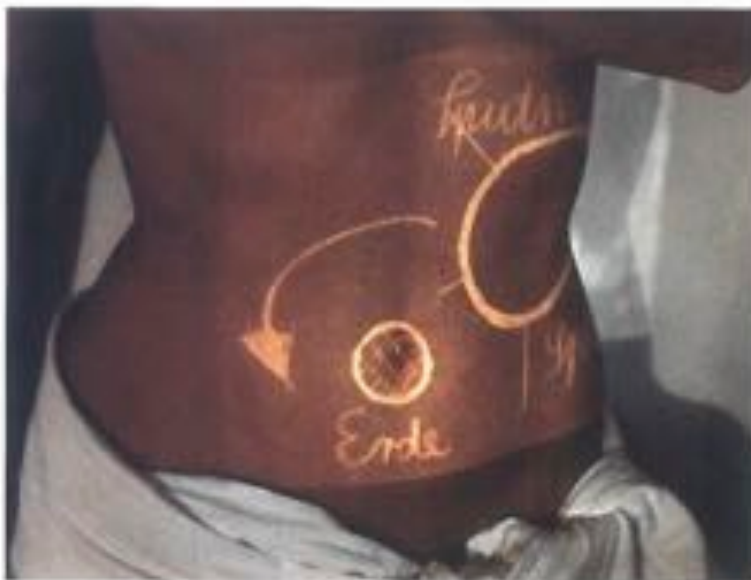
it less of a surprise – given her feminist allegiances – to discover in Jürgenssen's writings that she was a fan of Raymond Chandler.

His novels, which she loved for their directness and irony (and presumably despite their gender archetypes), fill a bookcase designed by the artist and inlaid with photos of eyes, mouths and lights. They lead the neighbouring *Umwelt* (1988), a grid of 12 photos in which a nude woman is silhouetted against a window, a sinister, detective-story vibe. Inside and outside are muddled: are I her lover watching from across the room, or a voyeur documenting her movements from the street? Though her scorching lines suggest a semaphore-style code, she remains an unknowable outline.

This interest in disorienting binaries – self and other, object and image, dark and light, soft and hard – is a constant theme of the exhibition. Photos are placed within sculptures that underline both their illusionistic and physical properties, and add a tactile dimension. In a series of untitled triptychs (1988–90), prints are wrapped in gauzy fabric

(so their imagery is partially obscured) and set in steel frames. Elsewhere, a hinged metal case opens to reveal, on one side, an image of a flower, and on the other, its darkened reflection. Titled *Nurture and Licht* (1991), it emphasises reflections of reflections of the world via photographic and mirror images, suggesting a self-enclosed system in which the image has become disconnected from reality. Given her early challenge to the gap between socially imposed feminine ideals and women's experience, these boxes might suggest art as a space free from life's constraints.

The four 1988 *Umwelt* (Body projection) photos that, lining a corridor, both open and close the exhibition, take the muddling of perceived boundaries further still. Using simple projections of insubstantial shadows and light, Jürgenssen's skin becomes the surface for a constellation of stars, tiny bouncing kangaroos, writing and abstract blobs. Melding with other signs, her body cannot easily be read as 'woman'. It's as if such categories dissolve before our eyes. *Sky Sherwin*



Umwelt (Body projection), 1988/1989, colour photograph,
30 x 20 cm. © the artist.

Courtesy Alison Jacques Gallery, London, and Galerie Hubert Witsen, Vienna