

KATZ CONTEMPORARY

Brood

Felicity Lunn

Brood was originally conceived by the artists as an army, ornithological stand-ins for a band of warfaring men. But as soon as they were placed in an orderly line of pairings in the museum, it was obvious that the birds were less like soldiers than refugees, the traumatised victims of natural catastrophes or the targets of political purges. Like every work by Lutz & Guggisberg, the reading of Brood cannot be confined to a single interpretation. Its deliberate openness and ambiguity allows for meanders of the subconscious and the irrational, engendering a deep uncertainty as to whether we should find the installation comically touching or threatening. It is not even clear whether the birds are undergoing a process of construction or deconstruction for Brood is literally half-way between being completed and destroyed, between the end of communal life and the traces of a surviving group dynamic. In depriving the birds of wings, the artists have radically curtailed the birds' freedom. Taking their unnerving process one step further, by stalling the creative act and setting fire to the entire flock, the artists have played God in deciding when to quell the flames and allow their invention to cling, traumatised, to a purgatorial form of life. Wood has long played a major role in Lutz & Guggisberg's practice in works composed either from fetish or kitsch objects assembled from flea markets or from gnarled branches and bulbous roots collected directly from the woods. Both sources have an ancient, primitive quality, far removed from the traditional confines of "high art". The works they are transformed into might conjure images of medieval shaman constructing magical assemblages if they weren't the highly sophisticated inventions of artists with an intense understanding of sculptural concerns. Unlike these earlier objects made from found trinkets or natural wood, that shifted between functional construction and aesthetic deconstruction, the more mundane packing crates used for Brood are far removed from their original function and appearance. The Europalettes provided a ready source of cheap wooden boards that could be roughly broken apart and reconstructed into the crude but clearly recognisable shapes of birds. In this way, Brood is a clear example of how Lutz & Guggisberg not only shape material into ideas but how their ideas are also inspired and formed by the materials they come across on their permanent forages. Their work also, inevitably, contains internal relationships, creating a web that connects pieces with a similar sensibility but made of different materials. The sculpture Mercenaries, for example, also made in 2005 but constructed from bituminous paint and terracotta, shares the insistent presence of Brood, as well as the visible signs of the process of making the work. Mercenaries is one of the few smaller sculptures that could be compared with Brood. As an installation, it would be tempting to place the piece in the lineage of the model form, one of the leitmotifs of Lutz & Guggisberg's work that embodies their approach of creating open, ambiguous assemblages with multiple interpretations. They have mimicked the design aesthetic of bourgeois living rooms, fusing cleanly presented found objects and imitations of the familiar things that fill our daily lives. Other ensembles have included meditative lounges, futuristic cockpits, cozy bed-rooms, fictional libraries and museum collections that deconstruct our world of ordinary functions and experiences. Brood, however, is neither an architectural space nor the imitation of a human endeavour but rather a fantastical metaphor for the kind of traumatic experience that is unfamiliar to most of us but real and intense nonetheless. Brood in its current form was made for an exhibition at the Migros Museum of Contemporary Art in Zurich in 2005.

Due to the scale of the work and the process of producing it, the artists constructed it in the large yard at the Löwenbräu complex, in which the Migros Museum is situated. During an unusually hot week in August, the curators and gallerists in the Löwenbräu were witness to the construction and then burning of the birds, the intense odour of scorched wood permeating the exhibition spaces and offices. Once displayed in public, the bedraggled, reduced quality of the group became a major talking point of the exhibition. Reading human characteristics and emotions into the birds' varying sizes and degrees of strength, visitors were affected by the fragments of wood and traces of charcoal that strewed the birds' dishevelled journey and appeared to continue the process of decay. The hard-to-ignore quality of Lutz & Guggisberg's offspring, not only the combination of pathos and mischief but also the sense that the work introduces something new into one's perception, connects Brood to the work by Sigmar Polke, Jan Fabre, and Fischli/Weiss. Similarly using mundane materials to explore profound ideas, these artists have a lightness of touch that opens up the concept of the sublime to new interpretations. Like the work of these more illustrious precedents, Lutz & Guggisberg's Brood has an artisanal quality that openly declares the fun the artists have in messing about with stuff that allows the world's precarious equilibrium to emerge. Not only does Brood combine what are superficially extreme contrasts, from the emotions the installation inspires to the suspension of the plastic forms between the figurative and the abstract. The title of the work also plays quite consciously with language, recalling not only the German words for "offspring" and "broody" but the French "brut" or "rough" as applied to the movement "art brut". The expression "brütend heiss" ("bloody hot") refers playfully to the burning process, while "brutal" in both languages touches on the darker side of the work. The compactness of the single word "brood" goes beyond these meanings, however, to suggest a more amorphous sense of profusion, variety, disorder and the threat of chaos. In this way the title reflects Lutz & Guggisberg's densely symbolic image-making process that leads the viewer's imagination in a multitude of directions. From the horrors of the film *The Birds* to the humour of *Chicken Run*, the creatures have long held a fascination for us that is enhanced in Brood by their touchingly human quality. It is not the first time that Lutz & Guggisberg have appropriated and humanised the animal kingdom, but the mannerist bathos of the work renders Brood their densest metaphor yet for the fragility of life.