

Olga Balema *Motherland*

Galerie Fons Welters, Amsterdam 13 May – 18 June

Even if the work by the American-Ukrainian artist Olga Balema is often grubby, rusty or stained, that very grubbiness has been a continual source of fascination. That's true, too, of the seven new works presented here under the title *Motherland*. Part of a larger group of works – others of which are being shown concurrently at the Swiss Institute in New York – these are neo-Surrealist hybrids that comprise old school maps treated with latex, pigment and acrylic paint, stuck onto which are latex breasts.

In *Mothers Nature* (all works 2016), the most fully accomplished work at Galerie Fons Welters, a geographical map more than two metres wide titled 'DIE SOWJETUNION NACH 1939' (The Soviet Union after 1939) shows the red realm and its sphere of influence, from the Iron Curtain up to the Bering Strait. The map, as is pointed out with pedantic precision, was published by Justus van Perthes in Darmstadt and was drawn to a scale of 1:4.800.000. Here, the communist ideal state is inundated with pools of semitransparent yellow latex, rendering the map splotchy and lumpy. The former empire in which Balema was born (in Lviv, 1984) has been transformed into a squelchy quagmire.

A scattering of female breasts rises up, from Turkmenistan, Kamchatka, Siberia, the Arctic Ocean. They droop and flop dolefully.

The drama surges in *Necessity is the mother of all invention*, painted on a map of the European 'KRISE DER DEMOKRATIE (1919–1939)' (Crisis of Democracy (1919–1939)). The European continent lies hidden under a thick layer of bottle-green latex, as if the map itself has become a landscape, a dark forest. At the top, where the latex has been ripped off, pale pink paint features, suggesting that the map might just as well be a peachy baby skin.

Other works have been painted onto maps representing the era of the Reformation, the topography of Africa and European postwar integration politics. These superannuated attempts to chart the chaos of world history create a sense of fatalism. No map proves equal to the constant chafing of cultures. Balema seems to emphasise this by attacking the dry pedagogical materials with pools of liquid gloop. Borders, countries and territories drown in a deluge of sticky rubber; their names become illegible, useless, ultimately nonsensical. The sagging breasts reinforce the notion of despondency and futility.

In *Everybody and their mother* the school map has been covered in a layer of lavender paint, superimposed onto which is a red shape outlining the contours of an arid wilderness, and once again a latex breast. The work is suspended free in space, allowing you to walk around it and view all sides, but this adds nothing. All works in the exhibition are frontal in nature and shown to their best advantage when they hang on (or better still, are suspended in front of) the wall, so that the deplorable condition of the cockled surface and solidified latex is clearly visible.

How to interpret this unpleasant, absurd Cronenbergian fusion of body and map? Does the unnatural, tumouresque festering of breasts signify illness and decay? Or does it symbolise the imperturbable procreation of all organic life? The mother breast that feeds new life is associated with the mother country which, in part at least, determines who you are. Both formative forces appear close to exhaustion – the breasts no longer produce milk, civilisations are ruined by drought and famine. Balema offers us a grim view of the world stage and at the same time appeals to the primitive urge of primordial life. It's all so hideous that I can't take my eyes off it.

Dominic van den Boogerd



Motherland, 2016 (installation view). Photo: Gert Jan van Rooij.
Courtesy Galerie Fons Welters, Amsterdam