

Winnie Claessens

"Now on its way to the _____"

"Copy, one alpha"

"_____enduring laboratory in orbit."

FRED&FERRY GALLERY

03.04-07.05.2022

Smoke surrounds the launch pad. There is a noticeable delay between the female voice over and the excited countdown of the agitated audience at the scene - "3!" "4!" "2!" "3!" "1!" "2!" "0!" "1!". A blinding inflammation. From the rising orange glow, a flickering lilac tail emerges, impossible to capture properly on screen. The cloud transforms into a white-hot streak, contrasting sharply against the black night. One rocket, four astronauts, in a straight line to the International Space Station. A commentator in the background dramatically declares: "Now on its way to the enduring laboratory in orbit." She is briefly interrupted. It is November 11, 2021 and the Crew-3 mission has been launched.

This mission is part of a frantic race to space: various world powers today are still conducting intensive studies into space equipment, astrobiology and space physics - knowledge is and remains power. In collaboration with NASA, a new player was however working on Crew-3: SpaceX, the aerospace company of billionaire Elon Musk. Musk has repeatedly expressed his ambition to put humans on Mars within five years. Is that kind of boundless belief in the promise of a new world admirable? How much will this achievement require, and from whom? Doesn't space travel sickens the Earth even more? Who decides how a new society on a new planet would take shape? The first settler?

These are multifaceted questions that also resonated with **Winnie Claessens**. In her previous work, she already delved into similar visionary projects in which the limits of human knowledge were explored, into frenzied ideals in which people lost themselves. For this exhibition, however, she exchanges a historical for a futuristic perspective; the noble mountaineers and arctic explorers of the past for the space pioneers of the future. It nevertheless completes the circle serendipitously that the Crew-3 rocket was nicknamed "Endurance", after the ship that adventurer Ernest Shackleton sailed to the South Pole with in 1914, in pursuit of crossing the continent over land.

Whether she focuses on modernist utopias (based on traditional techniques) or future dystopias (shaped by a reality that sometimes seems to trump science fiction), Claessens makes no judgment. With a lucid curiosity, she recreates worlds in which interpretations are stimulated, the imagination enticed. Claessens's installations are strongly narratively charged and testify to her background in scenography and fascination for film. Each installation is an immersive universe in which the beautiful and the abject, the comic and the tragic, the good and the evil can coexist.

Claessens usually translates these grand stories into a smaller material form. She reconstructs the often melancholic scenes and atmospheres in fragile models. These aesthetic scale models transcend their purely applied function; they are an ode to manual making and attentive observation. Herein, Claessens's approach feeds on her predilection for old Japanese theater forms and film effects, in which the same care and craftsmanship are central. For Claessens, every imitation is an attempt to make things more comprehensible, better understood. By doing so, she reduces inconceivable experiences to a conceivable scale. She manages to capture the sublime feeling of the overwhelmingly uncontrollable in a controlled, still fragment. And although that recording seems naturalistic, the realistic is a mere starting point. Claessens rethinks and reworks and does not hide her constructions. Sometimes advanced CGI worsens emotional engagement and visual

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imagination more than analog effects. The magic of "make-believe" doesn't disappear because the apparatus is showing - maybe even, quite the contrary.

Also for this exhibition, Claessens made several models. There are the rescaled versions of alien landscapes. They could be true representations of the planet Mars, in their brownish-red hues and crumbled texture. But how do you imagine something that only a few will experience in person? It still is an imperfect pursuit - much like in the 19th-century, when astronomer James Nasmyth wanted to make a photographic image of the lunar surface, but therefore had to plaster model lunar landscapes based on his telescopic observations (due to the limited possibilities of the photographic medium at the time). Claessens plays with these multiple layers in the show: she made videos of the models, which she in turn projects in the same space.

This transposing of objects in different media is also repeated in the sculptures that refer to space debris. Space junk is man-made and left behind trash that floats aimlessly through space. Claessens used earthly waste to make these works and in doing so ascribed singular voices to them. She then brought these characters together in a new video work. The ballet of space debris is influenced by science fiction film (music), but is most inspired by a quote from the book "Sputnik Love" by Haruki Murakami: "Lonely metal souls in the unimpeded darkness of space, they meet, pass each other, and part, never to meet again. No words passing between them. No promises to keep."

Equally lonely are the satellites that hover around the earth as symbols of the intrinsically human lust for knowledge. And also the unmanned Voyager probes are left to their own devices. The probes were launched in the 1970s and are currently in interstellar space. They each carry a golden record with illustrations and sounds, representative of the diversity of life on Earth. It includes sounds of nature, musical recordings and greetings in 55 languages. The critical caveat to this, however, is that it is highly likely that extraterrestrial life will not pick up the probes until after Earth and humanity have already been wiped out.

It can all seem quite naive. Golden records that potentially no one ever hears. Exploring new red soil while the waste accumulates elsewhere. Industrial magnates investing money in trans-arctic expeditions. A white line en route to the ISS. But does naive have to be negative? Can naivety be a refusal to give up? A stand against the total relativization of everything and everyone, in the words of writer Stefan Hertmans? A form of hope in spite of, perhaps?

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Als onderdeel van haar artistieke praktijk baatte Winnie Claessens sinds september 2020 1:40,5 Gallery uit. Zoals de naam doet vermoeden, is deze galerie een maquette op schaal 1:40,5 van Fred&Ferry Gallery. Ze werd ook getoond in de bureauruimte daar. Claessens bouwde de mini-galerie en selecteerde na een open call acht kunstenaars voor een solotentoonstelling. Deze kunstenaars kregen *carte blanche*: de precieze uitnodiging en uitdaging zat net in het herdenken van tentoonstellingspraktijken, wars van productieve of financiële haalbaarheid - in de wereld van de maquette kon alles. In het verlengde met haar praktijk, fungeerde 1:40,5 gallery als Claessens' eigen utopische project over een gedeelde verbeelding op schaal.

As part of her artistic practice, Winnie Claessens runs 1:40.5 Gallery since September 2020. As the name suggests, this gallery is a model on scale 1:40.5 of Fred&Ferry Gallery. It was also shown in the office space there. Claessens built the mini-gallery and, after an open call, selected eight artists for a solo exhibition. These artists were given *carte blanche*: the invitation and challenge was precisely to rethink exhibition practices, averse to production or financial feasibility - anything was possible in the world of the model. In line with her practice, 1:40.5 gallery functioned as Claessens's own utopian project about a shared, scaled down imagination.

The past exhibitions were:

#1 Karina Beumer, "Some, or all, have been a projection of Uhl's mind", 06.09-10.10.2020

#2 Elleke Frijters, "I never promised you a rosegarden", 25.10-28.11.2020

#3 Rien Schellemans & Gijs Waterschoot, "Fruit en notes", 14.02-20.03.2021

#4 Winnie Claessens, "The truth is out there", 13.05-04.07.2021

#5 Winnie Claessens, "The pool edition", 05.09-09.10.2021

#6 Gunther Segers, "Bottom's up", 24.10-28.11.2021

#7 Ludivine Thomas Anderson, "Reluctor et emergo", 05.12.2021-22.01.2022

#8 Ben Van den Broeck, "Reprojection1", 06.02-12.03.2022

#9 Kasper De Vos, "Beams & Dreams", 03.04-07.05.2022