

Unicorn Hunt (Birgit Rathsmann, 2006)

Medieval and early Renaissance artists used the unicorn as a symbol of purity and perfection. And as a priapic stand-in for Christ. Over and over, they painted or wove the mythical beast into the center of a story: Nobles spot the unicorn, hunt it, then capture it, demonstrating their own purity, perfection, and dominion over commoners. And their own priapic tendencies. The unicorn hunt was allegory for a top-down society.

Birgit Rathsmann's Unicorn Hunt tears that story to bits and reassembles it for a topsy-turvy society – one obsessed with illegal aliens, shadowy plots, and questions about national greatness. Like her predecessors, she's fascinated by the rituals of the hunt: the posed portraits, pseudo-military hierarchy, livery, and armory. But Rathsmann sets the narrative in a city, now. The allegory stretches until it breaks and questions pour out: What's a hunter to do when his prey is a myth? If a group of people organize themselves so that they can more effectively dispense violence, will they do violence even if the enemy is absent? Rathsmann suggests that hunters without quarry will turn on themselves. Some will assert dominion over others. We have digital cameras and boneheaded journalists instead of court painters and poets, but the priapism is the same as it was in the Middle Ages.

Rathsmann's too sly and playful to put those themes front and center, though. She flirts with viewers, drawing them in with luscious images, saturated colors, graceful movement, and absurd humor, all the while ratcheting up the sense of mystery and the characters' reverie. Her narrative leaves enough wiggle-room to force viewers to decide what, exactly, is going on; her dark agenda reveals itself slowly and grows clearer with each viewing, but so do the beauty, sympathy, and comedy. Rathsmann seems to say that while we can still be idiotic beasts, we're nonetheless compelling and enjoyable viewing.

– Ray Tristanovich

Ray Tristanovich writes on art and music in the UK and US.