

MARGARET HAINES

BATTLEFIELD

REX

SIGNALLING TO THE PAST
— Caroline Heron

Stepping into the narrative installation of *Battlefield ReX* at KRIEG, one arrives at the shifting centre of a biography of the late artist, Marjorie Cameron (1922-1995). There is no beginning, middle or end to this research, just an ever-expanding constellation of relationships, events and modes of thought. Its current expression is held together in the precise visual system of the exhibition. The audience is invited to navigate a tactile assortment of objects: barometers assessing the mood, tessellating snakes made of marble, models of places that once existed. Haines skilfully juxtaposes, nods to and fleetingly associates signs and signifiers across this ephemera, testing epistemological parameters to establish a synthesized position where her leading character is brought to life.

Recognized mononymously as Cameron, the so-called 'mysterious poetess' is perhaps most easily recognised as performing alongside Anaïs Nin in Kenneth Anger's 1954 film *Inauguration of the Pleasure Dome*. Her highly personal body of poetry and small-scale artworks was produced across five decades in tandem with a dedication to mysticism, feminism, radical art practice, performance, poetry and occultism. Alongside figurative sketches and portraits of everyday life, her works feature subject matter such as energy vibrations, and symbolic, mythological and literary creatures in imaginary landscapes and ritualistic ceremonial practice. Residing in Los Angeles for the majority of her life, Cameron acted as an influential figure of the American mid-century underground, and was a spiritual and artistic mentor and friend to Aya Tarlow, Wallace Berman, George Herms, Curtis Harrington and Dennis Hopper, among others.

A neon sign in the shape of a wine glass is held in a vitrine. It is filled with argon, an abundant element present in the air we breathe and studied by scientists when considering the birth of planets. By enclosing the inert gas and electrifying it, the particles vibrate to glow blue. In the same sense of bringing together or making tangible that which is already in existence, *Battlefield ReX* is an actualization of the artist's investigative process. It coincides

with and draws from a chapter from Haines' forthcoming book, *On Air: Purity, Corruption and Pollution*. The narrative text will be written from the perspective of a researcher engaging with Cameron's biography, work and times. As an extensive reading of a subject, the book will pair both Haines' formal archival work conducted as a board member of the Cameron Parsons Foundation since 2014, with a wider analysis of the contemporary moment. One that is more personal to the artist and allowing for an alignment with the tangential or apophenic.

Writing is as much an abstract space of representation for Haines as film, installation or performance. In previous works, such as 'COCO' (2014) and 'I dreamt in heaven' (2017), she moves fluidly between these disciplines to establish a multifaceted language reflective of a contemporary networked and digital age. *Battlefield ReX* is an opportunity for Haines to give new form to her writing process, and to consider the uncanny within the act of writing itself. Further, it is taken at a moment in which to reflect upon the nature of biography in a creative practice. Haines questions this through reference to the act of libation — the widely practiced ritual of 'pouring out' a liquid in appreciation or remembrance of the dead. Gnarly 3D printed vessels filled with water are present both in vitrines and also as scanned

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and animated objects. Like transparent globules, they float in front of a harp or lyre photographed in the music school opposite Haines' apartment. In Greek and Celtic mythology, the instrument is said to be a method of communication with the celestial, the Underworld, and correlates with the constellation called Lyra. Approaching the installation with this in mind, the selected and sourced objects brought together by the artist in *Battlefield ReX* can be seen to form a circuit board, or a tool for signalling to everything which has passed.

In the exhibition, we are introduced to Cameron through a depiction in the similarly titled chapter, *Battlefield Rex*, from *On Air* in which she experiences a UFO sighting in Pasadena, circa January or February 1946. This is a pivotal moment in Cameron's life, according to Haines, and it precipitates an exploration of the concept of the divine essence and in particular, the return of the matriarchal era. Cameron was introduced in part to esotericism through her marriage to rocket scientist and occult leader, Jack Parsons. The text opens on their wedding day in October 1946. Haines absorbs this reading of the extra-terrestrial as an elemental power into the central motifs of the installation and places it in contrast to the high-tech conception of space exploration, which was at the forefront of the American public consciousness at the time.

While under the influence of a heavy flu, Haines hallucinated the subsequent title of the show and chapter title, *Battlefield ReX*. Like falling down an algorithmic rabbit hole, click-throughs led her to establish a relational space between previously disparate objects; throwing up a graphic of a Tyrannosaurus rex and a profile from a video game called *Battletank LOBA* who is 'master of the Eridani battlefield'. Next, there's the exoplanet Epsilon Eridani, which is regularly name-checked in sci-fi and was considered by NASA's SETI (Search for Extra-terrestrial Intelligence) programme in 1960 as an off-earth site for human habitation. It is one of 48 constellations documented by Greek astrologer Ptolemy in the 2nd century AD, along with Lyra. Haines continually moves back and forth between this search engine flow of consciousness and her rigorous archival work at the Cameron Parsons Foundation. This process of layering is akin to the circumstantial reasoning inherent in the intuitive logic of mysticism, while being equally reflective of contemporary means of knowledge production in horizontal environments online.

The final methodological tool in this exhaustive process hints towards a writers' room. Used in TV

and film, these are temporary production spaces for rapidly reworking and finalising scripts. Conducted usually in advance of commissioning, they are seen as a cheaper alternative to producing a pilot, illustrating just enough of the narrative and character development to strength test an idea with audiences. A whiteboard orders plot lines and excerpts from the *On Air* book chapter are etched into the vitrines. Period costumes, makeup and pieces of fabric give notable human form in an installation that is otherwise without a true to life image of Cameron. A writers' room is not unlike a crime scene investigation in that it traces characters, relationships and actions, as well as looks to understand the motives and driving forces behind them. It maintains a consistency in storytelling, denoting the death of the author as many writers now work on iterations of the same script.

In *Battlefield ReX*, there is an overwhelming sense of the actions of others. Far beyond the straightforward presentation of historical fact, Haines displays dexterity in steering a course through multiple narrative tropes in which the artefact, personal diary, search result and episode are pieced together. What emerges as *Battlefield ReX* is a hybrid communication that calls on the present as the vivid embodiment of the past.

Margaret Haines is an artist and writer based in Los Angeles and Amsterdam. Solo and duo exhibitions include *Poppositions* in Brussels (2019), *Auto Italia* in London (2018), *1646* in The Hague (2017), and (upcoming) *Rozenstraat — a rose is a rose is a rose* in Amsterdam (2020). In 2015-2016 she attended the *Rijksakademie van beeldende kunsten* in Amsterdam. Her writing and film works have recently been presented at The East End Film Festival, Carroll Fletcher and The ICA in London, *Today's Art* in The Hague, *VISIO lo schermo dell'arte* in Florence, *Human Resources* in Los Angeles, *Spazio Murate* in Bari, Italy and *Western Front Exhibitions* in Vancouver, Canada.

More information on the artist: www.margarethaines.com

Margaret Haines – BATTLEFIELD ReX

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