

Filip Berendt – *Pandemic*

In 2009 Filip Berendt created a series of photographs of mould structures grown and painstakingly manipulated by the artist in his Warsaw studio. Over ten years before Coronavirus, Berendt titled the series *Pandemic*. Now, in the middle of the global crisis, l'étrangère gallery, London launches its new digital viewing platform by revisiting Berendt's work in order to ask: what happens to art in the face of catastrophe?

The twelve photographs of Berendt's *Pandemic* series oscillate between abstraction and symbolism, and from everyday absurdities (a mouldy old orange or the hairs you might fish from the plughole) to grand narratives of civilisation and collapse.

Here Filip Berendt speaks from his home in Warsaw to Edinburgh-based writer Tom Jeffreys.

Tom Jeffreys: Hi Filip. Nice to meet you online! I hope you're safe and well. How are things in Warsaw?

Filip Berendt: Hi Tom! Warsaw is also on lockdown. It's quite restricted. All the parks are closed, only food shops and pharmacies are open. People are really taking it seriously and everyone is at home. In Poland, it hasn't been such a bad situation as Italy or Spain. It's a tragedy but it's not on the same scale.

TJ: How are you coping personally?

FB: It's like a golden cage that will affect our future social behaviour. We have everything – food and devices and contact with people – but it's a quite strange perspective to observe life from a balcony. I'm ok though – I'm really focusing on meditation which helps me to maintain mental balance. Looking from the balcony, you do not see fear, but you feel it in a city that has not felt it for decades: the virus spilled like an invisible toxic fog, everyone who could have escaped to the countryside and the urban nature and animals paradoxically recovered this lost urban area.

TJ: Are you able to make work?

FB: I'm focused on painting. I'm using a thirteenth-century technique, painting on a wooden board. It's a technique associated with holy icon painting. I have a small table right now in my flat and I'm painting here using this technique. You build up lots of thin layers of paint – it's a very slow process. It's part of a wider body of work that brings together different global faiths as a way out for Homo sapiens to constantly create new metaphors and stories based on the same key present in all religions.

TJ: It's over a decade since you made the *Pandemic* series of photographs in 2009. What can you remember about it?

FB: The starting point was a series of satellite views of cities at night. When I looked at these kinds of images ten, eleven years ago it occurred to me that human civilisation looks like mould on the earth. When you look at the patterns of light in these pictures, they are exactly like the structures of mould. That is why I chose to use mould as a material. All the photographs in *Pandemic* are photographs of mould.

Mould is also of course quite symbolic because it combines life and death in one material. That's simplistic but it's true. Mould never stops – it's an ongoing process of growth and decay. Only photography can freeze mould in a moment exactly as I want.

Mould does have a symbolic value in the work, but I'm really interested in its form and structure. Likewise, the compositions are primarily abstract but you can also read some of them as symbolic. What is important to me is that you can't recognise the scale when you first look at any of the images. There is no information – each image could be of the universe or it could be microscopic.

In the current situation with Coronavirus and everywhere on lockdown, *Pandemic* looks incredibly serious. But when I made the work ten years ago, it was not so serious. The tone was different – not funny exactly, but more...

TJ: ...playful?

FB: Yes. Like sketches of a situation – symbolic and abstract sketches. Now, with everything that has happened, the narrative value of the project has changed. The situation is very serious, with people dying all over the world, but I think there is still a distance between the work and the subject.

TJ: Could you say a bit about the way the images were produced?

FB: I start with a white laboratory board or sometimes a white canvas. The main material is biological pulp which I use to grow the mould on. I can control the structure and colour of the mould. It changes colour over time, so I add extra organic pulp in order to control the effect of the painting or drawing. I can control it to some extent. Some have a blood-like, fleshy effect; others are totally different, but it's the same material. One influence is the period in the aftermath of World War Two when artists, especially in Poland, were interested in emphasising the materiality of the painted object.

TJ: What kind of time scale are we talking about? Days? Months?

FB: A few weeks generally. It depends on the behaviour of the mould and what I'm trying to achieve. Some of them took a long time, some just a few days.

TJ: What makes you want to capture a particular moment in the mould's ongoing process of growing and dying?

FB: That's a hard question! The decision when to take a photograph is an artistic decision. Sometimes it's very emotional, sometimes it's a question of time. For me, it's often when I decide that I have these two levels – abstract and symbolic – and that you can read the image both ways. Sometimes it's also a question of composition. [This one](#) for example – it's really abstract, bloody...



Filip Berendt, *Pandemic VII*, 2009, archival print on dibond, 60 x 50cm, Edition 6 + 2AP

TJ: Sort of rusty, brown-red...?

FB: Yes. I really like this painting – I think of it as a painting – because I found here the range of possibilities to work with mould. There is a huge range of textures. It's a little bit fleshy and bloody but it could also be a satellite view of a mouldy city...

TJ: I love this play between scales. Sometimes you feel you're looking something at a cellular level, but then you look again and it seems like some kind of map of a whole city or even a planet. It plays with your vision in such an interesting way. It's almost disorientating.

FB: Exactly!

TJ: Can we look at a few other specific works – [this one](#), for example?



Filip Berendt, *Pandemic V*, 2009, archival print on dibond, 50 x 50cm, Edition 6 + 2AP

FB: Yes, so if you look carefully you can see that it's a mouldy orange surrounded by a ring of hairy mould. I'm using a medium-format camera and when the scale of the image is larger you can see it more clearly. The symbolism of the orange is not so important; this is really an abstract image.

TJ: And [this one](#)?



Filip Berendt, *Pandemic IV*, 2009, archival print on dibond, 50 x 40cm, Edition 6 + 2AP

FB: Well, even though, as I've said, I treat *Pandemic* as predominantly abstract, here I am using the skull as a symbol. It's an obvious symbol, but at the same time you can't tell if it is an animal or human skull. When you look at the skull you can also see what looks like a kind of river. Again, you can read the image at a macro and a micro scale.

TJ: You mentioned that the starting point for the series was satellite images of human cities. So is it possible to interpret the series such that humans are the pandemic?

FB: Yes. I think that we are a pandemic for this earth. Because of evolution and our brains and religion, we are able to co-operate and to dominate. Homo Sapiens are a pandemic for this planet, and maybe even for other planets in the future. At the same time, if you take a cosmic perspective, people are not so important.

TJ: In Daisy Hildyard's book, *The Second Body*, she mentions that, at the cellular level, human cells and fungus are almost indistinguishable. Which is why scientists experiment on fungus as if it were human, and also why it can be so hard to treat fungal infections...

FB: I didn't know about it – it's interesting information.

TJ: One thought I had was that, if the mould is an analogy for humanity, and your role as the artist is to control the life and death of the mould, does that put you in the position of a kind of god?

FB: I'm not sure. When you treat an artist as a god you are taking things very seriously. I am not so serious. In my opinion a god is just a human story, but at the same time it's a story that helps us accomplish amazing things. Without religion, I don't think humans would have created civilisation.

TJ: How do you think of the mould itself? I know some artists who would think of the process as a collaboration with a fellow life form. But for you it is more of a material?

FB: I treat mould as a symbolic material – as a great metaphor of everything. It's living death! It sounds like a horror film with zombies, but from a cosmic vantage point it's an image of life on earth. We cannot be gods but we can look upon the earth from the perspective of space. Life on earth – living and dying on the earth, now, in this moment now – it's happening all together at the same scale. It's living and growing and dying all the time. The whole structure of the earth is breathing.

TJ: And just one final question from me. During the lockdown, philosopher Bruno Latour is asking a [series of questions](#) to try and encourage us to use this moment of tragedy as an opportunity for change. One question he asks is: What are the activities now suspended that you would like to see not resumed?

FB: I am afraid that our biology is stronger than fear, which will disappear after a time. But I hope that people start to think about this experience in a new way. Maybe we can live slower. We don't have to live so fast, so mouldy.

Tom Jeffreys is a writer based in Edinburgh. He is the author of *Signal Failure* (Influx Press, 2017) and *The White Birch* (Little, Brown, 2021) and editor of online magazine *The Learned Pig*.