

love your clean feet on thursday

young-jun tak

solo exhibition

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The Ritual: Sacred That is Profane, Profane That is Sacred
by Övül Ö. Durmuşoğlu

Atlantiades [Hermaphroditos] fought back, denying the Nymph her joy; she strained the more; her clinging body seemed fixed fast to his. 'Fool, fight me as you will,' she cried, 'You will not escape! Ye Gods ordain no day shall ever dawn to part us twain!' Her prayer found gods to hear; both bodies merged in one, both blended in one form and face. — Ovid's Metamorphoses.

Sleeping Hermaphrodite (1st century CE), discovered in the Roman Diocletian baths in 1618 and now displayed in the Sully section of the Louvre, may be one of the most beautiful and sensual representations of the human body from ancient times. The puffy mattress was added by the sculptor Gian Lorenzo Bernini at the request of the sculpture's owner, Cardinal Scipione Borghese, one of Rome's wealthiest men and an astute art collector who commissioned works that would define the Baroque movement. Bernini's adaptation became so famous in the 17th century that it was replicated in royal courts and aristocratic homes. Ovid's *Metamorphoses* narrates the transformation of Atlantiades, the gorgeous son of Aphrodite and Hermes, born and raised on Mount Ida, into Hermaphroditos after Nymph Sal-macis' plea to unite with him in passion. *Sleeping Hermaphrodite* not only plays with the perfect balance of masculinity and femininity, rationality (Hermes) and beauty (Aphrodite) in a mythical body, but also subverts the codes of desire, envisioning a fusion beyond the traditional gender binary, fifteen centuries later.

Filmmaker and sculptor Young-jun Tak resists normalizing how the pagan blends into the sacred, or how the sacred becomes profane in everyday objects and rituals. He refuses to treat this interplay as an exception. Instead, he seeks to instrumentalize the breach playfully, particularly in his exploration of queer desire. Tak understands that representation is inextricable from embodiment, and that within all systems of representation, the iconic and symbolic coexist with indexical forms of knowledge.¹ In this context, he would be curious about how the puffy mattress finds its way through the hands of Bernini, how it carries the beautiful hermaphrodite to Catholic households like a magic carpet, and how the defining rules of sexual division are lustfully and artistically renegotiated. Transgressive desire always finds its path in the Western moral world of categories, order, and division, often through such renegotiations in art.

Tak's second entry in his choreography film series, *Love Your Clean Feet on Thursday* (2023), continues to reflect on the heteronormative duality that seeks to impose order through the exclusion of queer, trans, non-binary, and other non-normative bodies—despite the complex embodiments of homoerotic desire that bypass this duality.

In this work, the choreography draws from two cultural artifacts—one popular, the other highbrow. The first is the annual *Transfer of Christ* performance by Spanish Legion soldiers in Andalusia during Holy Week; the second is Kenneth MacMillan's groundbreaking ballet *Manon*, first staged in 1974 at London's Royal Ballet. Led by Jamal Callender, a troupe of male dancers advances through Grunewald Forest, a historic gay cruising spot in Berlin, evoking Christopher Isherwood's recollection in his 1976 memoir *Christopher and His Kind*: "Berlin meant boys." The choreography is inspired by a scene in *Manon* where the eponymous female protagonist is lifted and carried above the heads of men as an object of desire. *Manon*, a colloquial version of Marie, is based on Abbé Prévost's 1731 novel *L'Histoire du Chevalier des Grieux et de Manon Lescaut*, which was later adapted into operas by Massenet and Puccini and various films. Manon is depicted as a complicated character, and the story follows the woman who, on her way to a convent, falls in love with Des Grieux but ultimately chooses to become a courtesan of Monsieur G.M. to escape poverty. Manon—portrayed as an amoral figure and conceived as a female stereotype meant to promote moral behavior by Catholic clerics—was an

unconventional and provocative figure for ballet, surprising audiences and critics at the time. MacMillan's circular, up-close choreography, inspired by ice skating, subverts the story's moralistic framework.

Love Your Clean Feet on Thursday alternates between intimate body shots of muscular, confident Spanish Legion soldiers in their uniforms, carrying a wooden crucified statue of Jesus in Andalusia, and the cool, queer male dancers of Callender's troupe in Grunewald. The dancers carry Yi-Chi Lee in a connected sequence of movements, ensuring his body remains long and linear, with his feet never touching the ground. In some scenes, he resembles a porcelain doll; in others, he seems animated by invisible puppet strings. The troupe wears minimal, sexy Berlin club attire—black shorts and t-shirts. Both Jesus as an icon and Lee as a symbolic Manon serve as pivotal yet passive agents shaping the movements of the dancers. The touch of worship and the touch of desire merge into each other. The feet in military boots and sneakers converse in pace, negotiating a fluid masculinity, with embodied desire finding space in fluidity. Tak uses his camera as a haptic tool of desire, caressing and exploring. Meanwhile, one of the dancers narrates and reflects on the importance and necessity of touch.

The Spanish Legion is a corps of professional troops structured to fight in Spain's colonial campaigns in North African in 1920, and their performance in the film, shot in Andalusia, symbolizes the established power of imperial Catholicism in the region after the 15th-century Reconquista of Al-Andalus, which violently expelled Muslims and Jews. At the same time, the Legion is notoriously part of the gay fetish universe, with their tight, deep V-neck uniforms displaying muscles, buttocks, and tattoos. Their passionate march, singing *Novio de la Muerte* ("The Boyfriend of Death") while carrying a half-naked Jesus, is a dramatic display of hypermasculinity, set in a historically charged and economically poor region of Spain near North Africa. This exercise in hypermasculinity performs a patriarchal pedestal of gender division and hierarchy within the established imperial order under Catholic Christianity. Yet, it simultaneously triggers homoerotic desire within an institution that has historically opposed homosexuality. When *Manon*'s music replaces the soldiers' singing, the militaristic tone softens, creating space for the performative interaction between soldier bodies and the half-naked Jesus.

The mirroring filmic conversation between these rituals is delicate, sensual, and unexpected. Not only does hypermasculinity merge with hyperfemininity, but the 'sacred' and the 'profane' also intertwine, challenging the official narrative of order and progress. Through Tak's analytical outsider gaze, these complex negotiations of desire become visible. If representation is inextricable from embodiment, what do these two rituals—repeating and reflecting each other—tell us about the ways in which desire has been disembodied in the name of protecting societal institutions? Or of desire that is only driven to consume itself? The fluidity of queer movement reminds us of the fragile masculinity and destructiveness depicted in Claire Denis' *Beau Travail* (1999), which tells the story of a group of French Foreign Legion soldiers in Djibouti. The merging of masculinity and femininity in *Sleeping Hermaphroditus*, embodying carnal desire, provides a tantalizing answer to these questions, centuries before. Against the backdrop of populist alt-right movements today, which promote natalism to encourage family and childbirth, William Burroughs' voice echoes through Luca Guadagnino's recent take on *Queer* (2024), "I am not queer, I am disembodied."

Övül Ö. Durmuşoğlu is a curator, writer, and educator working on constructive critiques of civilization, the sustainability of inter-sectional futures, and practices of togetherness. She co-leads Art in Discourse at Braunschweig University of Art along with Ana Teixeira Pinto. Durmuşoğlu recently curated Nil Yalter's *The Story Behind Each Word Must Be Told* (Ab-Anbar, 2024), Pauline Boudry and Renate Lorenz's *Portrait of a Movement* at CA2M, Madrid, and Tensta Konsthall, Stockholm (2022–23), and Katrina Daschner's *Burn & Gloom, Glow & Moon: Thousand Years of Troubled Genders* at Kunsthalle Wien (2022). Between 2021 and 2023, she co-curated the 3rd and 4th editions of the Autostrada Biennale in Kosovo with Joanna Warsza. Earlier, she taught as a guest professor at Universität der Künste Berlin Graduate School; curated programs for the 10th, 13th, and 14th Istanbul Biennials; worked as a curator for steirischer herbst 2018; and coordinated and organized different programs and events at Maybe Education and Public Programs for DOCUMENTA (13). She lives and works in Berlin.

¹ Laura U. Marks, *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2000, p. 142