

ZUOZ, SWITZERLAND

Bethan Huws

GALERIE TSCHUDI

“If I were a frog I’d live in a fountain”: The very title of Bethan Huws’s recent exhibition told a little story. But this was no fairy tale—the idea of a frog who is really an enchanted prince waiting to be transformed by a kiss holds no interest for her. If she were a frog (or a Frenchman?) she’d be wide-awake and sitting precisely where Marcel Duchamp began his role-playing game with the readymade—namely, in the “fountain.”

In 2007, Huws made a neon work bearing the words AU FOND DU CERVEAU IL Y A UNE FONTAINE. In 2009, he made a version featuring the English translation—AT THE BASE OF THE BRAIN THERE IS A FOUNTAIN. For Huws, in other words, a fountain doesn’t only stand for the readymade. Here it is also a concept from which new visual and linguistic objectifications are constantly emerging. It can refer to “origin,” to an absolute and unconditioned beginning, and it can also cover “source,” an inexhaustible, constantly bubbling spring. “Fountain,” 2001–11, is a series of large-format photographs, nine of which were in this show. Set on blocks of wood and leaned against the wall, each depicts one of Rome’s many elaborate fountains. In a text work, *Origin and Source*, 1993–95, Huws compiled a vast compendium of notes on precisely the distinction between these two titular concepts. In so doing, she revealed the complex ways in which her art moves between originality and a

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Bethan Huws,
Frog, 2011, wig stand,
fur hat, toy frog,
17 × 11 × 11¾".

constant rereading of her own practice and that of other artists.

Thus, for example, one room included a collection of notes on the video work *Zone*, 2013. Huws's thoughts on film constitute an artistic work in their own right and assume a visual form—or at least one that is never worked out in linear terms. As in her extensive compendia *Origin and Source* and *Research Notes* 2014, Huws has designed every separate page as a graphic composition containing complex references back and forth between printed and handwritten texts, and with images arranged as a conceptual musical score. In this case, the work centers around the long passages on birds from Guillaume Apollinaire's poem "Zone."

The centerpiece of the exhibition was *The Large Glass*, 2016, in glowing yellow neon. It shows a vessel resembling a chalice, drawn in luminous lines and here suspended from the high roof of what was once a hayloft before becoming

part of Galerie Tschudi, which is located in a typical local building on the former village square of Zuoz. The sight of a neon sign's urban light illuminating the wooden walls of a barn produced an effect both of strangeness and magic. Since all the cables, terminals, and transformers are left visible, the work does not convey any sense of mystery. Its magic lies rather in the literal realization of Marcel Duchamp's famous title. This material formulation of the tautology reveals it to be surprisingly complex. Continuing the play of Duchampian references, next to it on the wooden floor shone a tall, slender neon bottle rack, *L'arbre* (The Tree), 2016.

In seventeenth-century France, Jean de La Fontaine was considered the master of the literary fable. In Huws's work, like that of La Fontaine, animals are able to speak with great expressiveness. In the small sculpture *Frog*, 2011, the little amphibian sits atop a fur cap like a diminutive crown, while an empty wig stand below it alludes to the composition's theatricality. Through birds and frogs the artist also speaks—with cunning and subtle irony.

—Hans Rudolf Reust

Translated from German by Nathaniel McBride.