

JOAN JONAS

VOLCANO SAGA 1985/1994

10 October to 15 January 2012, Lower Gallery

Wilkinson Gallery is pleased to present two concurrent exhibitions with the internationally acclaimed artist, Joan Jonas. In the Lower Gallery, Jonas will present *Volcano Saga*, 1985/1994, one of the most important installations existing from the artist's oeuvre.

I see Volcano Saga as the beginning of my synthesizing the development of female character, the story as mirror, and the volcanic landscapes as representation of narrative. Here, Iceland, was the connection of the psyche to the elements. As in "Wind", the elements become character. I chose as my story the 13th Century "Laxdaela Saga". This story is about a woman who married four times. The book begins with a historical account, tracing the characters' ancestry, then continues with the woman, Gundrun, who tells four dreams to a seer who then interprets the dreams. The second part of the saga involves the actual marriages and the carrying out of the prophecy.

A film crew recorded the landscapes on video. I photographed it, and on returning to New York, I developed a solo performance with video and slide projections of the different mostly volcanic landscapes that for me represented parts of the story – the four dreams. I finally turned the live performance into a 30-minute narrative for television broadcast, with Tilda Swinton playing Gundrun and Ron Vawter playing the seer Gest. I developed a way of telling the story in video with the foreground shot in the studio against the Icelandic landscapes as backdrops. Gundrun tells her dreams to Gest as they sit together in the hot springs – a beautiful blue lagoon with wond, mist, and black volcano rock. Sitting in the steamy blue made the relationship of the characters in the story erotic. I liked this added level of closeness in relation to our own ideas about how and when we tell our dreams to others, and how they are interpreted.

To frame the story in the present I began the tape by telling my story of an accident that actually happened, in which my car was blown off the road by the wind. Otherwise I played a small part. The tape ended with an old couple talking about how the fishing net was invented. By a woman, probably, they say.

Joan Jonas in *Joan Jonas: Performance Video Installation*, Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2001

This installation of *Volcano Saga*, first displayed at the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam in 1994, consists of all the original elements from the performances including the props and two sets of performance drawings, original slides, the final video work, and a video made from footage of a performance at The Art Institute, San Francisco, 1986. The slide projection consists of images of the performances and from the photographs Jonas made when she first visited Iceland before developing her first performance of *Volcano Saga* at De Appel, Amsterdam in 1985.

Volcano Saga, 1985-89 cultivates themes of the re-translation of story telling, the inquiry into female character and notions of nature and myth, which define Jonas' performance practice. Jonas often derives the narrative for her performances from ancient texts and through a process of interpretation re-communicates them into a contemporary context. Through the translation of established tales, Jonas enters the stories, uncovering layers, re-imagining and re-interpreting their accompanying myth and symbolism.

Jonas' discerning approach to performance and video has established her as a pioneer of performance and video art; she is one of the most important and influential artists to have emerged from the New York art scene of the 1960s and 1970s. Her work can be situated within this era of exploration and re-definition of the representation and role of women. Jonas was part of a movement of artists that questioned the pre-determined definitions of femininity, breaking down myths and cultural ideals through socially and politically engaged artistic practice, providing a new public space for the interpretation of notions of femininity and identity.

Joan Jonas (b. 1936, New York City, NY, USA) lives and works in New York. Jonas has become one of the first female performance, installation and video artists to become formally accepted by the institutional museum world with major solo exhibitions throughout Europe, the US and globally over the last 25 years. These include solo exhibitions at Bergen Kunsthalle, Norway (2011); Centre d'art Contemporain, Geneva, Switzerland (2008); MACBA - Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona, Spain (2007); The Renaissance Society, University of Chicago, USA (2004); Queens Museum of Art (2003); Galerie der Stadt Stuttgart, Germany (2000); Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam (1994/1979); PSI Contemporary Arts Center, New York (1982); Whitechapel Art Gallery, London (1979). Recent important performances include The Guggenheim Museum, New York (2010), Dia: Beacon, New York (2005), Tate Modern, London (2004). Jonas is also a professor of visual arts at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). A major new monograph edited by Joan Simon and published by Gregory R. Miller & Co. will be available in 2012.