

Diana Thater *Practical Effects*

November 10–December 10, 2022
519 West 19th Street, New York



Diana Thater, *Practical Effects*, 2022 (production still) Photo: T. Kelly Mason. © Diana Thater. Courtesy of the artist and David Zwirner

David Zwirner is pleased to present *Practical Effects*, a new large-scale video installation by trailblazing video artist Diana Thater at the gallery's 519 West 19th Street location. This will be Thater's first solo exhibition in New York since 2015 and her tenth solo presentation with the gallery.

Since emerging in the early 1990s, Thater has pioneered the use of film, video, light, and sound, continually challenging the boundaries of time-based media and installation art. Her work explores the relationship between the natural and man-made worlds while critically examining the structures of mediated reality. Drawing on a wide variety of sources, including literature, animal behavior sciences, mathematics, chess, and sociology, her evocative works directly engage their surroundings, producing an intricate relationship between time and space.

Approaching the idea of post-apocalyptic life through a poignant and wistful lens, *Practical Effects* follows a primate-like biomimetic robot who—as the last being left on Earth—has been tasked with the care and upkeep of a garden filled with intricately sculpted topiary animals. Devoid of human, animal, or mechanical contact, the colorful but weather-worn robot can only find companionship in the manicured topiary figures it cares for, putting forth a strange and tragicomic vision of how the organic and inorganic worlds might eventually collide and support one another in unexpected ways.

The exhibition's subject matter and its title—which refers to the cinematic art of creating “analog” special effects without the use of digital enhancements or other post-production techniques—together invoke the longstanding and ever-evolving tradition of depicting androids in media and film. Thater drew particular inspiration from the 1972 cult science-fiction film *Silent Running*, which explored the idea of robots as gardeners and gathered critical praise for its unique use of costuming and practical effects to characterize these possibly sentient beings. In turn, Thater collaborated with notable Hollywood costume house Michael Schmidt Studios to design and build the robot in *Practical Effects*. Thater and Schmidt

employed similar strategies in the design of her film's mechanical protagonist, bringing a crucial, irreplicable sense of humanity and soulfulness to its movements and gestures.

Following on her groundbreaking 360-degree video installations—in works such as *China* (1995), *relay* (a collaboration with T. Kelly Mason, 2007), *Chernobyl* (2011), and *Yes, there will be singing* (2020)—for this presentation Thater will project her film in the round onto the interior of a full-size silver circus tent. Visitors can watch the film by entering into the tent, which functions as an immersive multichannel screen while also evoking the circus's symbolic significance as a place of amusement centered around the often uncomfortable displacement of animals. A ghostlike imprint of Thater's projected video will also be visible throughout the exterior of the tent's semi-translucent fabric walls, imbuing the monumental structure with an eerie and funereal presence. Drawing on cinematic tactics of pathos and the absurd, *Practical Effects* infuses narrative elements with subversion and surprise in an exploration of the ways in which the relationships between man, machine, and animal might evolve in tandem with the physical and psychical condition of future Earth and its remaining inhabitants.

Thater writes about the project:

"In 2017, I began researching biomimetic robotics—robots based on animals—that have been built by engineers at NASA and MIT. To me, the robotic animal represents a twenty-first-century idea of the natural world; they propose that animals may serve as models for machines that can learn. I have long been interested in the idea of the inorganic machine caring for the organic world. We are in the era of the sixth great mass extinction—a human-made disaster that will bring thousands of species to the brink of extinction. I have spent my artistic career depicting images and ideas of the animal as we live through this era. In *Practical Effects* I attempt to create a sympathetic response to the animal and argue for their lives—for the animal as subject. It's about the idea of seeing animals in places where they don't belong; about how nature has become unnatural. What would it mean for the last creature on Earth—this man-robot-animal—to be a gardener and a caretaker of things past and future?"¹

Born in 1962 in San Francisco, Diana Thater studied art history at New York University, before receiving her MFA from the Art Center College of Design in Pasadena, California.

Since 1993, the artist's work has been represented by David Zwirner. *Yes there will be singing* was a sound, video, and light piece which could be experienced digitally via David Zwirner Offsite in 2020. In 2015, *Science, Fiction* marked her eighth solo exhibition at the gallery in New York. Previous shows include *Chernobyl* (2011), *Between Science and Magic* (2010), *Here is a text about the world...* (2008), *New Work* (2005), *the sky is unfolding under you* (2001), *China, Crayons & Molly Numbers 1 through 10* (1996), and *Late & Soon (Occident Trotting)* (1993).

In 2018, a solo presentation of the artist's work was the inaugural exhibition at the Institute of Contemporary Art Boston's Watershed space. In 2017, the solo show *A Runaway World* was first exhibited at The Mistake Room, Los Angeles and later traveled to Borusan Contemporary, Istanbul and the Guggenheim Bilbao, Spain. In 2015, a comprehensive mid-career survey of Thater's work, *The*

¹ Diana Thater, unpublished artist statement, December 2021.

Sympathetic Imagination, was organized by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and later traveled to the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago.

Over the past decade, her work has been the subject of solo exhibitions at prominent institutions that include the Aspen Art Museum, Colorado (2015); San Jose Museum of Art, California (2015); Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane (2011); Santa Monica Museum of Art, California (2010); Kunsthaus Graz, Austria (2009); Natural History Museum, London (2009); Kunsthalle Bremen, Germany (2004); Museum für Gegenwartskunst Siegen, Germany (2004); Dia Center for the Arts, New York (2001); and the Secession, Vienna (2000).

In 2018, the artist was awarded an Art + Technology Lab Grant from the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. Other notable awards and fellowships include a California Community Foundation Fellowship for Visual Artists (2014), as well as an award for artistic innovation from the Center for Cultural Innovation, Los Angeles (2011); a James D. Phelan Award in Film and Video (2006); a John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation Fellowship (2005); and a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship (1993).

Work by the artist is represented in museum collections worldwide, including the Art Institute of Chicago; Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh; Castello di Rivoli, Turin; Friedrich Christian Flick Collection im Hamburger Bahnhof – Museum für Gegenwart, Berlin; Los Angeles County Museum of Art; Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York; and the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.

Also a prolific writer, educator, and curator, Thater lives and works in Los Angeles.

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