

TIF SIGFRIDS

My dinner with who?

Chris Kraus

Everything changed in LA this winter because of the rain. It was a strange time: the wettest winter on record in the past century, rain coming down like hogs from the sky. Pretty soon roofs started leaking. They kept leaking. This continued for many weeks.

By March, a new climate, something like England's, descended. Everything was green, sunlight shafting through great gulfs in the clouds. The rain came and went. Rainbows appeared. Animals were everywhere, and the plants and the trees had a wild kind of softness and yearning about them.

I was trying to write about Los Angeles art--this time, for the British. An art press in London wanted me to write them an essay about the "scene" in the Los Angeles art world "now." Since I'd already written about the Los Angeles scene (somewhat negatively) in my book *Video Green: Los Angeles Art and the Triumph of Nothingness*, I thought it was time to go out and discover another Los Angeles, another art scene. One that was based on abundance and love.

I hung around Chinatown. My friend, the sci-fi writer and zine editor Mark von Schlegell, had recently teamed up with PREUSSPRESS, a Bernard Street gallery that claims to be a kind of culture-conglomerate (and maybe it is), although its myriad enterprises are all contained within the person of Joel Mesler, a self-proclaimed "Jewish Expressionist," who has been active in the LA art scene for half a decade. Joel had recently produced an extraordinary series of collaborative mono-prints by artists Henry Taylor, Andrew Hahn and Jason Meadows. On that particular morning, the press was cranking out a series of etchings for a local hip-hop celebrity. With their big-titted blondes and diminutive pimps, the images looked like dirty cocktail napkins from a 1960s adult novelty store.

Just two nights before, Joel and Mark recorded Annette Pylpchuk singing songs from a Mennonite hymnal. Now married to the well-known artist John Pylpchuk, Annette remains true to her traditional Mennonite roots. Mesler's convinced he can make her a star. "We discovered everyone is a rock star, if you treat them like one," said von Schlegell. With its adjacent recording studio, PREUSSPRESS is producing one or two CDs every week. "Our general theoretical concept," Mesler says, "is that young people of

our generation are really interested in high-end success, which is great, but they've left this wide open field for the low-end, middle ground. It's like, niche marketing," he explains.

So I wasn't surprised when Joel and Mark told me they were preparing production for *My Dinner With Merlin*, their first feature film. They'd already established a new business entity called 2/3/2 Studios. "Two--three--two," Mark explains, stands for "two days pre-production, three days shooting, two days of post." Based on the old Hollywood studio system, 2/3/2 intended to "maximize the easily available talent of artists and writers in the LA community." This was starting to sound a great deal like next season's book, Reena Spaulings, the sprawling saga of "a no one who could be anyone" co-written by 150 close friends of Bernadette Corporation, a New York-based artist collective. Like Bernadette, PREUSSPRESS saw this work as "an everyday group hallucination." Lately, I've thought that the only world-embracing life-consuming art projects left are marketing enterprises like American Apparel and Lush, so I was thrilled when Mark said there'd be a part for me, too. Merlin would be directed by German artist Frances Scholz (who is also von Schlegell's partner and girlfriend). At that very moment, she was en route from Cologne. There was a part in the movie for nearly everyone Joel and Mark knew: the artists Joan Jonas, Dan Graham; the writers Fanny Howe, Danzy Senna; the cultural historian Norman Klein. There was even a TV star (Peri Gilpin, who played Roz on *Frasier*) doing narration.

But who was Merlin? And why did he want to have dinner? The fill, Mesler told me, aimed to "unwind both the King Arthur legends and their analysis." It was von Schlegell's belief that we in LA "inhabit a continuous present, in which remote memories of pre-Christian, pre-civilized days explode into absence." I'd play Morgaine, a lost Druid priestess who stumbles around Malibu Creek State Park in an amnesiac haze looking for one or two good trees to worship. Right, I thought, rite, Druid porn. There was a wig and a long strapless dress. This was incredibly stupid; and then again, not. But didn't the Druids paint themselves blue?

Eight days later (PREUSS' "two day" dictum had been amended to "two weeks") I'm driving with Frances and Mark out to Malibu Creek. In the car, Mark tells me this park, with its medieval boulders and trees set into the coastal hills, had been a favorite locale of our mutual friend, the late Giovanni Intra. And yes, we agree, it's strange

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how this magnificent landscape exists just a short drive from our dark urban dwellings ... we could be here anytime, instead of on our computers and phones. Already they've filmed eight or nine scenes where strange happenstance affirmed the everyday presence of Merlin. Yesterday, two enormous Great Danes walked into the film as if out of nowhere.

As soon as we leave the car, everything seems mysterious and ancient. It is as if you need a movie camera running to really see. Mists dissolve above the crooked trees, water tumbles through the creek bed and we could be in Wales, or Gilead. "Everything is different," the narrator Peri Gilpin will explain, "But everything's the same." Brandishing a wooden sword, Morgaine fords the swollen creek. She climbs a steep green hill and pays homage to a sacred tree. Frances climbs up one of the tree branches, camera pointing downwards as I fall onto my knees and taste the rugged bark. "You need to worship the tree," Mark commands. Sunlight filters through the branches; everything's ecstatic and obscene.

We pack up the gear and gorge ourselves on organic corn chips. Later, as we're leaving the park, two deer emerge from the bramble and walk slowly out across the verdant field. Frances stops, turns on the camera. Morgaine puts on a white robe and follows them. They have become our deer.

Two days later, the crew drives out to Lancaster to shoot Mark's neighbour's friend Janine Roy on her Arabian white horse. She's playing Rhiannon, horse goddess of the Mabinogion, one of the Welsh sources of the Arthurian myth. In the Welsh story, Pwyll, a young nobleman (played, in this instance, by Mark von Schlegell) glimpses a mysterious horsewoman galloping past his castle window. He sends a guard to stop her. When Rhiannon evades him, Pwyll himself tries but can't catch her either. Finally she stops. Destined to fall in love, Pwyll helps Rhiannon escape her domineering father. The desert field Janine rides through this afternoon is almost completely orange, filled with wild saffron-coloured poppies that have come out in the rain. She's draped in veils; the field is sparkling. Her beauty contrasts strangely with the violence, blood and cruelty that occur throughout the film.

Still later, Norman Klein will expound on the King Arthur "mythmares" as an outpouring of the culture's Oedipal unconscious in an empty classroom at Art Center College of Design. Uncannily, a teacher from an earlier class has left

the word "Puberty" scrawled across the board. Iguanas will emerge from swimming pools. Goody-B. Wiseman sits beside the burns along the embankment of the LA River, reading a King Arthur myth. There will be songs, and miniature forests. In the great tradition of goofy structuralists--Ken Jacobs, Hollis Frampton--the LA art community will reinvent and deconstruct itself by donning wigs and sequins and acting out a play. Shades of Jack Smith. Or Bruce Yonemoto's and Dave Burns' informal screening attended three weeks ago: a 30-year retrospective of amateur porn videos made by Los Angeles artists, both known and forgotten. PRUESSPRESS' pagan pageantry is a wondering antidote to the institutional art world's terminal seriousness, raising the bar on the low.

My Dinner With Merlin will premiere in October 2005 at the Monika Spruth Galerie in Cologne.