

# Özgür Kar: HEAVY GROUND

Emalin, London, 29 November to 8 February

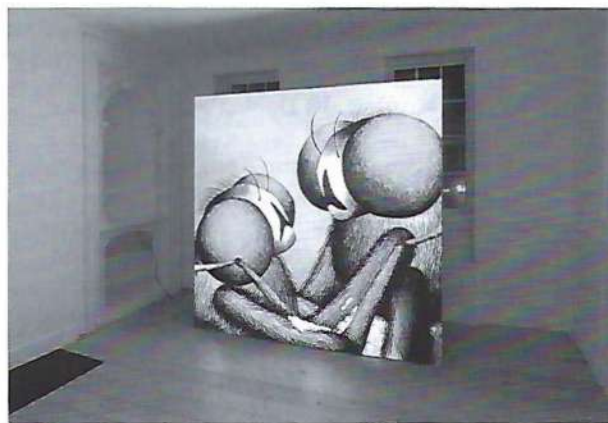
Özgür Kar's animations are haunted by flies. They buzz around a life-size fallen tree in *Fall*, 2023, while in *ROT*, another installation from 2023, they noisily hover about a damaged chain link gate, all forms rendered in stark white against black backgrounds. *HEAVY GROUND*, 2024, Kar's first film work using hand-drawn animation, features two flies, but this time presented at human scale in heightened colour, their eyes, huge glowing red orbs, their bodies, a pale Prussian blue contoured with hairy black strokes.

The first works encountered in 'HEAVY GROUND' are three of the exhibition's six Perspex-framed drawings of human-scale ladders from the 2024 series 'Ladders'. They lie on the floor or are propped against walls, upright or on their sides like props in an absurdist mise-en-scène. This theatricality is augmented by the chiaroscuro colouration that gives the illusion of artificial spotlighting or natural light and shadow cast from the side or from above at different angles onto the ladders' rungs. Closer inspection of the drawings reveals a hairy weave of flesh-coloured marks that evoke bodily limbs rather than a solid mode of ascent. Unlike the symbolism in Jacob's Ladder, for example, signalling progress and enlightenment, Kar's ladders lead nowhere: they rest in a state of suspended animation that hovers between earth and sky.

As you climb the gallery's narrow wooden winding stairs, *HEAVY GROUND*'s operatic score reverberates. A collaboration with musician Arnljótur Sigurðsson, it is based on an iconic recording of Clara Rockmore, the 1920s theremin sensation, covering *El amor brujo* (Love, the Magician), a 19th-century romantic piece of flamenco ballet composed by Manuel de Falla. Its haunting theremin-esque timbre was produced by overlaying old synthesisers on the soundtrack, while the video itself is shown on a large, state-of-the-art free-standing screen behind which a bunch of thick black cables are tangled (technology being an explicit presence in Kar's installations).

Inspired by pre-glasnost traditions in the 'Golden Era' of Czechoslovak, Soviet and Romanian animation as well as 1970s hand-drawn animation, Kar's graphics evince a surreal anachronistic materiality, though the first thing that struck me about the film was its intense colouration. Watercolour-painted blues and reds, of sky and spherical forms respectively, momentarily delay identification of the two gigantic flies stuck together on a glue paper trap that, at this scale, is like a landscape made of expanding foam. Hindlegs sunken in its mass, the black-haired, blue-bodied flies move rhythmically to the whining music which emits, in turns, from their cartoonish simplified mouths as their sex combs caress one another's swollen orbs and abdomens. There are no words, only a melancholic call and response, a lament or a courtship, that builds to such an exuberant pitch that any discomfort associated with flies as carriers of disease and pestilence, or as symbols of death in 15th-century memento mori, is dispelled.

As one fly raises its head towards the sky to sing, the other is gently caressed against its mass of abdominal hair, then the actions swap over, their mutuality reminiscent of what philosopher Elizabeth Grosz, in an essay on insect sex, refers to as sexual, rather than



Özgür Kar, *HEAVY GROUND*, 2024, video

natural, selection. While the latter has to do with mere survival, the former is a co-animated ritualistic encounter in which both participants become metamorphosed in superabundant intensity.

On a prosaic level, the film can be read as an allegory of the human condition at the dawn of its own extinction. In the face of their demise, the flies, as human stand-ins, capitulate to male hydraulic models of sexual desire that link sex to death, to expenditure and quiescence, and that also features of capitalist symbolic exchange in which excess leads to destruction. By contrast, the superabundant intensity of the pair's serenade/lament, while not without humour, exceeds the entrapment of desire in cycles of death-bound repetition. As both flies simultaneously raise their heads to the sky in song, the film exudes a bittersweet sublime. It doesn't last.

Nearing the end of the film's nine minutes, the flies engage in what the press release refers to as 'missionary sex'. The mutual caress and grain of voice is lost: the fly on its back probes the empty sky with its forelegs, while the dominant fly expels a few grunts. A tracking shot moves away from the pair to reveal a bleak scatter of singular dead flies caught in the gluey landscape, their eyes a cadaverous hue.

Being a loop, however, the operatic duet returns. Although the end is known, one rewatches to reexperience the exuberant whine and hypnotic motion of the sonorous caress. The sting in the tail is that, in being emitted from the mouths of flies that look like downturned Joker's smiles, *HEAVY GROUND*'s romantic lure is stuck between hope of escape and bleak fatalism. There is a realism to the latter, but it is also necessary to act as if the former were possible, a potential that is held in abeyance by ladders that could be reanimated at any time.

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