

Annie Ratti

AMANDA WILKINSON GALLERY

Wilhelm Reich spent a lifetime dodging persecutors—first the Nazis, then the FBI, then the American Immigration and Naturalization Service—but it was finally the US Food and Drug Administration that managed to capture and imprison him. The discredited German psychoanalyst believed he could heal the world by harnessing “orgone,” the life energy he believed was released in orgasm, whose suppression Reich claimed caused all mental and physical illness. Officially accused mostly of medical fraud—little more than quackery—Reich disproportionately infuriated both the international scientific establishment and Commiefearing postwar America. Eventually dying in a Pennsylvania penitentiary, Reich exemplified the sort of revolutionary outsider freely operating across disciplines (medicine, sociology, spirituality) who fascinates sculptor Annie Ratti. Her previous subjects have included the Italian art critic/memoirist/feminist/activist Carla Lonzi and various obscure pseudoscientists.

The exhibition “Anargonia” (named for Reich’s term for the absence of orgone energy) centered on two immense, rubbery, swirling sculptural hats: *Black Bird’s Hat* and *White Bird’s Hat*, both 2018, perched on purpose-built pedestals. These paired totems reach to about human height; the black one is about five feet three inches tall, not unlike your average woman; the white one reaches six feet nine inches, the height of an extremely tall man. Made from metal and wool (the complementary natural materials that Reich claimed trapped the phantasmic orgone) as well as styrene rubber and fabric, Ratti’s extravagant padded headgear is partially inspired by the egg shapes and looped diagrams that illustrate Reich’s treatises. These forms have been liberally mixed with spiral designs borrowed from Oceanic masks, mysterious winglike protrusions, and more; Ratti is hardly a Reichian purist. Above all, she is paying tribute to an idiosyncratic researcher who, however misguided, really did believe his “discovery” would benefit all humankind.

A heavy curtain of transparent plastic strips divided the gallery in half, marking an improvised border across the middle of the space. Sited on either side of the curtain, each elaborate helmetlike concoction occupied its micro territory in semi-isolation, almost as if forming half of a black/white mirror image—like a warring couple more alike in appearance and behavior than either cares to admit, forced to share the same room. Written large on the back wall was the glossary of Reichian terminology, translated into the fictitious Throne Codex alphabet from the 2010 sci-fi film *Tron: Legacy*. Words once considered so dangerous they were literally banned and burned—the US government twice torched Reich’s books and journals, in 1956 and 1960—were here reduced to an innocuous pattern of illegible strokes.

Ratti belongs to a generation of intellectually minded artists influenced by the once-fashionable Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, who famously reexamined marginalized thought systems such as schizophrenia, nonlinear geometries (the rhizome), and discontinuous states (becoming, rather than being). Over the past three decades, Ratti has rejected stasis and stylistic recognizability in her artmaking, recently taking inspiration from ceremonial clothing for her hybrid sculptures, such as these *Bird’s Hat* works or the immense kimonos and tall witch’s hat she presented this past summer at The Koppel Project in London. In today’s rigidly polarized world, Ratti seems to celebrate Reich’s pursuit of a healing and unifying worldview, however loopy. Why not follow the crazies who overlook divisions, who are determined to discover what joins rather than divides us, and who hope to stitch us back together, whether we are wearing impossible orgonic headgear, a pointy black hat, or even a red baseball cap?

— Gilda Williams