

THE WOMEN AND UNDINE

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Women emerge from the darkness and sink back into a sunless world. Luminously afloat, a woman surrenders to the sensual touch of the water, enveloped by the dark sea. Points of light turn out to be the reflections of eyes, gazing out and returning a gaze. Somewhere, there is light. Or are the watchful eyes of the observee looking past the observer? What does she see? Dense curtains of hair and tree leaves conceal faces; other faces look directly at their observer. Soft, ivory bodies nestle into meadows or contrast with the hardness of stones. Bright white heads of dandelion seeds take the place of sparkling eyes. The lustre of pupils is also imitated by pearls, products of aquatic creatures, of hard-shelled molluscs. Solid shell, soft insides in which beauty grows. Life has left its mark on her skin; wrinkles have etched themselves in. Perfect pearls resting against creased skin give the proud wearer an air of majesty. Plays of light and shadow on a fragile surface. Burrowing into a protective bed. Gesticulating behind a semi-transparent membrane, behind the protection of a window. Hiding a face, revealing a face, allowing a face to become blurred in the mist between attack and retreat. Very close in front of the observer, then shrouded again in mystery. Christine Bachmann takes portrait and nude photographs of women of various ages. The subjects of the photos are shown in rooms, outdoors, in the bushes, between trees, sleeping, posing, at night, in water, in sand, as a part of the elements. The places remain ambiguous. The women have completely normal bodies. Red patches on skin show that the delicate body's contact with the outside world can be precarious. They interact with nature and even look like natural beings. Hair flies wildly in the wind, at the mercy of the strong gusts, as spiky as the tree branches in the background. Each of the photographs in the series stands on its own, but is also a component of a comprehensive essay. Christine Bachmann has been working on the project "Undine geht" ("Undine leaves") since 2009. Its German title is a reference to a short story of the same name from Ingeborg Bachmann's 1961 book *Das dreißigste Jahr* (English version: *The Thirtieth Year*). The title seems to mark a turning point and announce a revisiting of the topic. Christine Bachmann presents the women in the context of the myth of Undine and the text by the writer. She creates her personal view of the

legendary water woman who goes away, leaving behind someone, something. But this is just one aspect of this multilayered work. Through Bachmann's photographs, the viewer can sink deeper and deeper, like in a body of water, and then find their way back to the surface, ascending.

An undine from the Latin *unda*, the wave, is a female water spirit. Undines live in raindrops, puddles, pools, ponds, wells, springs, streams, rivers and seas. The French *ondines*, the mermaids, nymphs, Naiads and Nereids of Greek mythology and the Slavic *rusalki* are similar to the bird-like sirens in that they often sing with enchanting voices that can be heard by people above the water. Undines evoke the image of the "foam born" Aphrodite. This image combines water and beauty, as well as doom. The semidivine, female elemental spirits pull unsuspecting children and seamen, as well as wrongdoers, into the deep. They have no soul and cannot empathise with others. An undine can acquire a soul by marrying a human. Then love determines the course of her life and fate. However, the undine will take the man's life if he is unfaithful, and she also brings suffering to the people who care about her. She remains an easily deceivable outsider and retreats, outcast, back into the water.

Ingeborg Bachmann's text represents a modern examination of the undine subject matter. On the one hand, Bachmann placed herself in a tradition that is primarily shaped by the 1811 fairy-tale novella *Undine* by Friedrich de la Motte Fouqué,¹ which in turn is based on stories about undines.² On the other hand, the author was in search of a new position for women in the Western European post-war era. She cites, adapts and transforms the subject matter.

In the story by de la Motte Fouqué, Undine is an active woman. She is bold and unruly, causing her foster parents great frustration. But it is also this very confidence that attracts the knight Huldbrand, whose name can be roughly translated as "burning grace". He falls in love with her in spite of the fact that her behaviour often confuses him.

Friedrich de la Motte Fouqué's story uses fairy-tale-like settings and characters: the sinister forest, the austere cottage of the fisherman, the magnificent Castle Ringstetten at the source of the Danube, the knight, the mysterious bride and the princess-like rival. Indeed, little by little, clues are revealed that make the incident, which apparently takes place in the middle ages, more realistic. The storyteller addresses the reader directly and reflects on the nature of humans in order to make their emotions understandable.

At first, Huldbrand and Undine are gradually brought together at the fisherman's cottage, under the inconspicuous influence of the male water spirit Kühleborn. This is followed by a change of location, alienation and, in the end, Huldbrand's betrayal and marriage to the rival Bertalda. The man curses Undine, thereby violating Kühleborn's sphere of influence. It ends with a funeral. In the beginning, water is compared to two loving arms that appear to embrace the land and its good fortune. In the end, a spring encircles the grave of the beloved.

Undine refers back to a patriarchal yet rather ambivalent model of femininity. She is allowed to leave the water if she falls in love, but life is painful for her. The Christian human world and pagan elemental realm contrast, light and darkness, house and wilderness. The piety of the honourable fisherman protects him from the illusions of the forest, while the undines obey the elements. However, moral judgements never occur. The fisherman describes Undine in a loving, fatherly manner as a disobedient child with whom it is impossible to be angry. She is also more admired in the city and as the lady of the castle than the bossy Bertalda, with whom she nevertheless continuously tries to make peace. However, one also has a certain sympathy for the rival, as the life of the mistress of the castle is more comfortable than the hard life of a fisherman's daughter. The water creatures are described as illusion; Kühleborn appears at times as a tall, white man, then as a stream. He keeps watch and takes vengeance. The allocation of roles remains unclear.

Undine rose to the position of sensitive and unfathomable literary figure.³ During the 19th century, she became a symbol of untamed nature, but also of the human character. Undine is not innocent and pure, but instead threatening and dangerous. Love brings a soul, warmth, but is fleeting, does not provide unconditional happiness, makes demands. Are nature and humanity in any way compatible? Undine's radical nature leads to confusion and catastrophes. Is her absoluteness a characteristic of nature or of the imperfect, flawed humans like whom she wishes to become?⁴ These texts deal with what love is, a constant negotiation of compromises, of give-and-take, of agreements, of thoughtfulness.

Ingeborg Bachmann's Undine speaks a monologue. Melancholy, unhappy and disappointed, she accuses someone, her Hans, of never having truly loved her. Hans is a pseudonym. Undine gives all men the name Hans and

accuses them of betraying her love, of exploitation, of destruction. And she describes Hans and all men as monsters, beasts and traitors – because men are only capable of destroying things.

In “Undine geht”, Ingeborg Bachmann asks whether men and women are in any way able to speak and live with one another. She differentiates between the sexes and places men and women at opposite poles. Is her Undine a character who strives for sovereignty? Is Bachmann taking advantage of the opportunity to question and reassign the guilt that is normally placed on women if they disturb the established order? Is manlessness an alternative for women? Can Undine be viewed as a metaphor for female existence?

Although Bachmann is revolting against a conservative view of women, Undine’s (and Bachmann’s?) accusations leave the reader feeling dissatisfied. Undine slips repeatedly into a depressing cycle of fatal relationships, suffers passively, has no plan or mind of her own. Everything is guided by fate and emotion. Bachmann’s Undine does not kill; the author relieves her of this lethal character trait. Time and again, her accusations come to nothing; she gives up hope and returns to her original element, to water, flees. Really? Does she free herself from Hans? For in the end, the reader can sense a tinge of longing and regret.

Christine Bachmann takes the game deeper with new levels of time and reality. She embeds her portraits in iconic representations of femininity. She references John Everett Millais’s painting of Ophelia drifting off with the current (1852).⁵ Shakespeare’s Ophelia sinks, dying, into nature. The motif of Venus afloat on the water, as portrayed by Sandro Botticelli in *The Birth of Venus* (c. 1485/1486), also appears to celebrate nature.

With these portraits of women, Christine Bachmann develops a new perspective. She embeds her female models into nature. Is she thereby designing an alternative, a utopia of a better life? Self-determined and sensitive? What does it mean that some of the women are completely or partially naked? Are they entrusting themselves, surrendering, to the air, the water? To feel the elements directly against their skin? Christine Bachmann shows women as akin to nature and darkness. She positions herself entirely on the side of the women, placing only them in the centre of her photographs, and surrounds them with the subject matter. The result is not a clear narrative with a beginning and an end, or a moral to the story, but instead a visual contemplation of women today with an open-ended outcome, full of dignity and self-assertion. With pearls, golden-yellow beech leaves and water.