

UPSTREAM
GALLERY

LA CASA LOBO

CHRISTOBAL LEÓN
& JOAQUIN COCIÑA





León & Cociña

Cristóbal León and Joaquín Cociña (both 1980, Chile) have been working together since 2007. They were educated at the Universidad Católica, Santiago de Chile. León also studied at UDK (Berlin) and De Ateliers (Amsterdam). With their experimental films, León and Cociña create a new interpretation of the religious symbolism and magical rituals that are deeply rooted in the traditional culture of Latin America. For the production of their films they combine different techniques such as photography, drawing, sculpture, dance and performance.

An unpolished cinematographic language characterizes the stop-motion films of León and Cociña. The papier mâché figures and innocent-looking drawings strongly contrast with the heavy topics such as religion, sex and death the films deal with.

León and Cociña won several awards and their films are selected regularly for international film festivals. Their work is frequently exhibited in museums and biennials in Latin America, but it has also been presented at venues such as the Whitechapel Gallery, the Guggenheim, KW Berlin, the Venice Biennial 2013 and Art Basel Statements 2012 with Upstream Gallery. Their first full-length film '*La Casa Lobo*' premiered at the 68th Berlinale in 2018, where it was awarded the Caligari Film Prize.



La Casa Lobo

La Casa Lobo tells the story of Maria, a young refugee stationed in southern Chile after escaping from a sect of German settlers. She is welcomed into the home by two pigs, the only inhabitants of the place. Like in a dream, the universe of the house reacts to Maria's feelings. The animals slowly transform into humans and the house becomes a nightmarish world. The film is inspired by Colonia Dignidad, a secretive and controversial sect in southern Chile established in the sixties by German immigrants. León & Cociña tell the story as if they were part of the sect. They pretend to be Colonia Dignidad's animation film company and make the film as an indoctrinating fairy tale.

León & Cociña, whose work was also on show at the Latin American pavilion of the Venice Biennial 2013, the Whitechapel Gallery, the Guggenheim and KW Berlin, have been working on the creation of *La Casa Lobo* since 2013. The artist duo has since created a monumental feature film with an impressive duration of 74 minutes. The film was shot frame by frame using digital photography, resulting in a single sequence shot. All of the aesthetic elements in *La Casa Lobo* are in a permanent state of change. Like in dreams, where one person can assimilate the attributes of another, the story and characters of the film take on different materialities. All of the changes in the house, characters and objects emphasize the permanent under-construction reality of the film.

For the incredibly time-consuming production process, they initiated a nomadic studio project setting up temporary workshops in museums and other art institutions. Starting at Upstream Gallery in 2013 during their exhibition *Flowers*, the studio has traveled to Casa Maauad in Mexico City, Modern Art Museum Buenos Aires, Contemporary Art Museum of Chile and the Media Arts Biennale in Santiago de Chile among other locations. Each time, *La Casa*

Lobo was presented as a work in progress. And by making the set part of the exhibition, the working process itself is turned into an artwork.

With their experimental films, León & Cociña create a new interpretation of the religious symbolism and magical rituals that are deeply rooted in the traditional culture of Latin America. The surrealistic, esoteric films of Chilean underground filmmaker Alejandro Jodorowsky but also the aesthetics of children's fairy tales are sources of inspiration for the duo. A distinctive, unpolished cinematographic language furthermore characterizes the stop-motion films by León & Cociña. The paper mache figures and innocent-looking drawings strongly contrast with the heavy topics such as religion, sex and death that the films deal with. Influenced by psychoanalytic theory, the artists seem to tap from a nightmarish collective subconscious. Their world is populated by sinister shadows and creatures that are constantly subject to metamorphosis, and seem to come straight from a hallucination or a fever dream. Yet the atmosphere can shift quickly and the ominous creatures dissolve as quickly as they appeared.

La Casa Lobo premiered at the 68th Berlinale in 2018, where it was awarded the Caligari Film Prize. Since then it was selected for several film festivals around the world where León & Cociña won many awards and prizes, among which the *Best Animated Feature Film* at FicMonterrey (Mexico), *Best Latin American Film* at Quito Latin American Film Festival (Ecuador), *Jury Distinction* at Annecy Film Festival (France), *GNCR Prize Special Mention* at FidMarseille (France) and the *Special Mention of the Jury* at Future Film Festival Bologna (Italy).



Filmmakers Cristobal Leon and Joaquin Cociña turn Chile's darkest hour into a stop-motion fairy tale

Kimberly Bradley

Inspired by the brutal history of Colonia Dignidad, the film is a must-see at Art Basel Miami Beach

Once upon a time, a colony of German immigrants lived in southern Chile, framed by mountains of imposing beauty: a community devoted to God, secluded from the temptations of the outside world, and living in harmony with nature.

So begins *La Casa Lobo* (*The Wolf House*; 2018), a feature-length stop-motion animated film by the Chilean artist duo Cristobal Leon and Joaquin Cociña, which is having its artworld debut at **Upstream Gallery** at Art Basel Miami Beach. It tells the story of Maria, a dreamy girl from a German colony, who absentmindedly lets three pigs escape from their pen. As punishment, she must spend 100 days and nights without speaking to anyone to reflect on her transgression. So she runs away.

The plot seems like something from a Grim(m) fairy tale, but *The Wolf House* is rooted in a real-life story: Colonia Dignidad was a German colony south of Santiago de Chile, founded in 1961 by lay pastor Paul Schäfer. Like many postwar émigrés in South America, Schäfer had National Socialist ties. Colonia Dignidad ran for decades as an agricultural and religious

commune; residents, however, lived in a secret dystopia of barbed-wire fences, searchlights, hard labor, and no way out. When the Chilean dictator Augusto Pinochet took power in the 1970s, his government used the enclave as an undercover center for arms production, torture, money laundering, and pedophilic sexual abuse. The Colonia thus gained tremendous political power. Only five people ever escaped. In the late 1980s, reports of abuse began leaking; Schäfer went underground in the mid-1990s, was later jailed, and died in 2010.

'Colonia Dignidad was a quite present subject in Chile – we both grew up during the dictatorship,' says Leon. 'It was central to the recent history of our country, so it's important for us to speak about it.'

The artists frame *The Wolf House* as a propaganda film for the colony – a message against ever leaving. After a brief, archival, live-action introduction (ostensibly in the narrated voice of Schäfer, discounting the 'rumors' about the colony), the work shifts to animated stop-motion, following Maria's flight through an animated charcoal-drawing forest, chased by a wolf until she comes to a three-dimensional house that she enters as a refuge. The house

envelops Maria, who narrates the film in both Spanish and German. The house is a dark, claustrophobic space, with the walls covered in drawings and masks. The pig move, practically heaving as they expand and contract, is a key element, with the drawing on the walls, sometimes as a sculpture or mask, or as a drawing masking tape or papier-mâché, sprouting from the walls.

Two of the pigs become her companions, constantly transforming into children named Ana and Pedro. They are initially blonde children (colony residents referred to as 'blonde children' until various tragedies befell them. Transformed into pigs, they are summoned back; she leaves the house and returns with a 'vitality and helpful spirit' and takes care of Chilean children in the colony'.



Cristobal Leon and Joaquin Cociña, *La Casa Lobo* (The Wolf House)

The simple narrative is dark and surreal: a bleak, dystopian world, with elements, such as a wolf, with references to the instability, and the conflicting pulls of human instinct. The film is inspired by the cinematic moods and devices of, say, David Lynch's *Blue Velvet*, as this film's primary visual inspiration, while the film's animation is inspired by the Czech stop-motion artist Jan Svankmajer. In *The Wolf House*, Leon and Weiss's *Der Lauf der Dinge* and the work of the film's collaborator Claudio Vargas, using his own ambivalence towards the world, leaves, and the low growling of the wolf – according to the artists, 'a low growl'.

Myriad details refer to mysticism or religion, such as the girl's name, a boy who cries black tears. At one point, the girl is seen through a wall. 'We used religious symbols because the film is inspired by pop culture, too, makes an appearance. 'There's a reference to the Mexican sitcom] 'El Chavo' – grownups dressing up as children, which emerged experimentally, during what the two

The duo began collaborating in 2007, having met while studying at the University of the Arts in Berlin, as well as their shared background in drawing dovetailed with Leon's interest in the visual-arts field, showing them alongside sculpture and animation to the production process. More recently, their film *The Wolf House* won this year's Caligari film prize in

Publication by Art Basel about La Casa Lobo

On the occasion of Upstream Gallery's presentation of *La Casa Lobo* at Art Basel Miami Beach, Art Basel interviewed Cristóbal León and Joaquín Cociña

Find the publication [here](#).

Spanish and German, but its rooms continually contract. Maria sometimes appears as a rendered in everyday materials, such as the floor, sometimes as a puppet.

antly morphing as she does. Maria turns them initially dark-haired but are later transformed to Chileans as 'pigs'). The three live together and into a small bird, Maria hears a voice returns to the colony. There, she 'recovers her children to be 'educated and healed in the



(The Wolf House), 2018. Courtesy of the artists.

x, very adult fairy tale that combines familiar colony – a plunge into psychological independence and connection. It also connects David Lynch (Leon mentions Lynch's *Eraserhead* the artists' oeuvre is often compared to that of inspirations from the art field include **Fischli** and **Thomas Hirschhorn**). A sparse soundtrack by ambient sounds – harps, chirping birds, rustling companies it all.

uch as crosses, Madonna and child, a picture of wolf's presence is represented as a huge eye on sect was religious,' says Cociña. Latin American are things we like,' adds Cociña, 'like [the like kids on Mexican TV.' Most references call a 'chaotic' production.

et at art school in Santiago (Leon later studied at De Ateliers in Amsterdam). Cociña's animation; they produced short films in the tures, paintings, drawings, and murals related work has entered the film-festival circuit: *The* in the Berlinale's Forum section.



The film took five years to make and involved a clever production strategy. 'We're visual artists,' says Leon, 'so when we started the film, we were confronted with locking ourselves into a studio for years and not making exhibitions.' The two came up with the idea of creating the film publicly and nomadically. Twelve exhibitions took place, mostly throughout Santiago, with the artists and their team using each space as an open studio, which in part explains the animated house's ever-changing interiors. The film grew organically as each scene – 12 frames per second, with one planned drawing per scene – emerged. 'We feel we need to rethink the way we use art spaces in our country,' says Cociña, who says that many of the materials in the film were found in the institutions they worked in. (Other materials came from flea markets: Leon frequently scours them wherever he's working to see what he might find.)

Other artists were sometimes invited to join. 'We built a system of working, in which everything is accepted – when you see a drawing coming together with circles and lines, it's because two people had different criteria,' says Cociña. Knowing their own tendency to stray from technique, the duo even created a list of guidelines to keep shooting consistent over the long production period – reminiscent, perhaps, of the strict rules of Lars von Trier and Thomas Vinterberg's Dogme films of the 1990s.

The *Wolf House* is a cornucopia of visual imagery that offers political critique from a surprising perspective. Leon and Cociña have chosen to slip into the skin of a controversial figure. 'Here in Chile, all contemporary art is left-wing artists like us, wanting more justice in the world,' says Cociña, explaining why the film takes on authoritarianism and its psychological effects from the inside. 'But we find it really boring that you go to an opening, watch a film, and you agree with everything. We think it's more fun to be fascist.' Both artists laugh. 'He said that, not me!' exclaims Leon.

Living happily ever after might be a universal goal, but Leon and Cociña shine a light on the price we all might pay. The last line of the film, narrated as if it were Schäfer addressing the viewer, is: 'Do you want me to take care of you?'

Cristobal Leon and Joaquin Cociña's *La Casa Lobo* (*The Wolf House*, 2018) will be shown by Upstream gallery in the Positions sector of the 2018 edition of Art Basel Miami Beach. Discover more artists and galleries participating in this year's Nova sector [here](#).

Top image: Cristobal Leon and Joaquin Cociña, *La Casa Lobo* (*The Wolf House*), 2018. Courtesy of the artists.





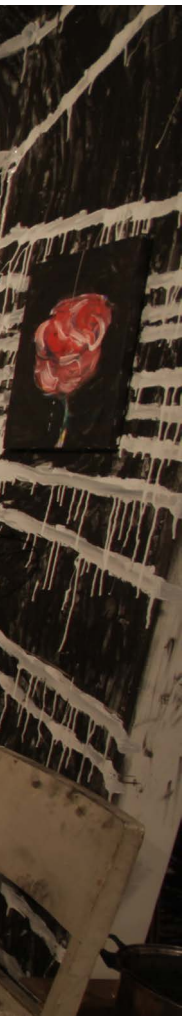
La Casa Lobo, 2018





La Casa Lobo, 2018
video, animation
75 min





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video, animation
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Cristóbal León and Joaquín Cociña at work at the set of *La Casa Lobo*





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