

nils alix- tabeling

→ *après judee sill,
quatre chants
pour une catabase*

after judee sill, four songs for one catabase

Nils Alix-Tabeling's expansive artistic practice encompasses a diverse range of mediums, including sculpture, performance, and painting. Drawing inspiration from ancient myths, pagan rituals, and science fiction, as well as contemporary themes such as queer issues and ecological crises, his work explores the boundaries between reality and fiction. Alix-Tabeling creates an imaginative, transhistorical universe populated not only by fantastical creatures, but also by historically marginalized figures, developing a symbolist and hybrid aesthetic that defies social norms and fixed representations.

This exhibition is inspired by the enigmatic figure of the 1970s folk singer Judee Sill, whose brief but captivating career left an indelible mark. Sill's mystical poetry resonates deeply with the artist Nils Alix-Tabeling, emerging from a period of moral liberation fuelled by the hippy counterculture movement. The emotional power of

Sill's songs offers a poignant means of navigating difficult times, to guide the feeling of disappearance and loss towards new forms. Like a catabasis - the hero's initiatory descent into the underworld as depicted in Greek mythology - the exhibition invites visitors on an introspective journey into realms of gentle melancholy. Through this exploration, the exhibition aims to provide solace and insight during challenging periods.

Four sculptures represent the cardinal points of this journey, providing allegorical responses to the emotions that Judee Sill's songs *The Pearl*, *The Donor*, *The Kiss* and *The Phoenix*, inspire in the artist. The journey culminates in an installation that combines video, sculpture, song, and performance, creating a poetic ceremony that captures the spiritual essence of Sill's music, performed here by artist Lucy Sissy Miller.

judee sill

1944-1979

The Californian singer-songwriter Judee Sill experienced an intense yet fleeting career during the 1970s. As the first artist signed by the prestigious Asylum Records label—which later produced Joni Mitchell, Bob Dylan and Tom Waits—she released just two albums: her self-titled debut *Judee Sill* in 1971 and *Heart Food* in 1973. Despite a remarkable debut that hinted at a promising future, the anticipated success never materialized, and she swiftly faded from the public eye. The singer, whose life was marked by turbulence, ultimately succumbed to her inner demons, dying prematurely from an overdose in 1979. Though unknown to the public during her lifetime, Sill's talent was posthumously rediscovered and celebrated, eventually establishing her as a significant figure in folk music history.

exhibition's
works →

the pearl

wooden mirror, silk, pearls and goat gut, jesmonite, steel, plastic

*Beautiful pearl, oh when will you reappear?
Mysteries unfurl and become so clear
When I feel you near
I found a way outside myself
To make my spirit climb*

Judee Sill, excerpt from « The Pearl », 1973

In Judee Sill's song, the pearl symbolises light emerging from darkness — illumination at the end of an ordeal. Nils Alix-Tabeling's diptych of sculptures explores this idea of revealing and concealing. The blind mirror, the tinted silk veil, and the curtains of pearls each act as thresholds that reveal as much as they conceal and separate. They are like borders between two worlds, echoing the catabasis⁰¹ referenced in the title.

The materials chosen by the artist bring together the precious and the perishable, as seen in these cascades of pearls encapsulated in dried goat's tripe. Recalling the traditional technique of making stringed musical instruments from animal guts, the use of goatskin also evokes a world of ritual, witchcraft and black magic.

⁰¹ In Greek mythology, the term 'catabasis' refers to a hero's initiation journey into the Underworld.

the kiss

two censers in patinated bronze, dried flowers

*Love, risin' from the mists
Promise me this and only this
Holy breath touchin' me
Like a wind song
Sweet communion of a kiss*

Judee Sill, excerpt from « The Pearl », 1973

Two bronze censers shaped like faces stand ready for an enigmatic ritual. In the video below, the artist burns incense, creating aromatic smoke that flows seamlessly from one mouth to the other—a kiss connecting these vessels. Throughout the exhibition, duality emerges as a recurring theme, with pieces often appearing in pairs or reflecting symmetrical designs. This particular work emphasizes duality through its multiplied faces, resonating with the song's exploration of merging opposites: life flowing into death, material blending with spiritual. Through the gentle kiss of smoke, these contrasting elements achieve a fluid, harmonious union.

Facing them is a humanoid cat in fanciful clothing. A fantastical little pet, *Christina; crypt.ic dancer* is a demonic yet adorable creature who casts her protective aura over the exhibition like a mischievous genie watching over the home.

the donor

steel mirror, glass, wood, silk,
embroideries, flower

*O waters of the moon, your vapors swirls and swoon
Your wake is wide, your wake is wide
And sorrow's like an arrow, shootin' straight and narrow
Aimin' true, its sting goes reachin' to the marrow, silence cried*
Judee Sill, extrait de « The Donor », 1973

Judee Sill's song flows through a spiritual quest for redemption, its liturgical essence carried on the gentle current of the 'Kyrie eleison' refrain ('Lord have mercy' in Ancient Greek), which ripples outward like a prayer across still waters. In response, Nils Alix-Tabeling's mural sculpture presents an arrow that navigates the stream between pain and beauty within the song, tracing the course of an inner struggle. The unyielding metal suggests a weight of oppression yet merges seamlessly with the delicate lily and embroidered birds on silk medallions, creating a visual melody that ascends toward flight and transcendence.

Nearby stand two vases crafted from resin-impregnated papier-mâché, each subtly revealing a hidden face. *Seine-Senne* represents two rivers with the same name that run through Paris and Brussels, two cities where the artist has lived. Emerging from spiralling shells like unfurling buds or awakening cocoons, these river creatures embody a fascinating merger of human, animal and plant realms, their forms suggesting constant transformation and interconnection.

the phoenix

sculpture, wood, steel, resin-coated
papier maché

*The sun was red, and the fires were roarin'
Stars aligned and the webs were spun
I coulda sworn I heard my spirit soarin'
Guess I'm always chasin' the sun, hopin' we will soon be one*
Judee Sill, excerpt from « The Phoenix », 1973

Drawing inspiration from the mythological phoenix, which rises from the ashes, Judee Sill's song is an allegory of resilience and inner transformation. Spreading its flaming wings, Nils Alix Tabeling's *Phoenix* takes the form of a fire screen, the kind placed in front of a fireplace. Paradoxically made of wood and paper, it is also particularly vulnerable to flames, as if entering the cycle of destruction and rebirth that it represents.

The incandescent hue that colours the faces and wings, arranged in the shape of a heart, is that of the pigment 'caput mortuum' (dead head), a purplish-brown ochre that the artist uses in many of his works.

after judee sill, quatre chants pour une catabase after judee sill, four songs for one catabase

video installation,
digitalized VHS video,
35', wood, silk and
dried plants

As part of the exhibition, Nils Alix-Tabeling invited the artist Lucy Sissy Miller to perform four songs by Judee Sill. The songs were performed at the Garage, Centre d'art d'Amboise, in a visual environment of sculptures and performative costumes. The film echoes the recording of Lucy Sissy Miller's concert with poetic scenes that respond to Judee Sill's lyrics.

Emanating from a white piano, the filmed performance is akin to a ceremony dedicated to the late singer. Through music and ritual, the work establishes a spiritual connection with her. Incense, candles, flowers and beads are also employed to poetically transcend grief and mourning through art, emotion and beauty.

nils alix-tabeling's text (performed in the vidéo)

Uncertainty is what hurt the most.
Not knowing where you are,
Not knowing if you are.

I am ranting in my head about all the things I wish I had told you,
All the things I worry I will never be able to tell. Either because you will still be gone,
Or because I will not yet have learned how to say them.

I fell like we both wished we could rewind time.
You, so you could change how your life has gone,
Me so I would have understood how much my life depended on yours.

I know you are gone, I hope you are still grounded here.
That we share the same air, the same earth.
I fell paralysed by sorrow.

I breathe in, imagine the air gentle, It wants to help.
I listen to the birds, I picture them friendly, they can tell something is wrong,
I fell the earth under me, the grass, I hope you are still walking it.
The sunlight heats my skin, it craves to heal.

I look at the water, the river, I wish it brought release through amnesia.
The water is cold, welcoming like the styx. Would bathing make me forget?
Somehow I wish it did, but I worry that would be unfair to you.

Are we destined? Are some of us predisposed to sadness?

I remember us being happy, it went too slowly. I don't know when we started to slip out of sync.

Somehow pain always felt like a part of it.

We both took the blows, laughed, and stood up.

I miss you now, I miss you then. I am worried to see you again and that nothing will have changed.

That it will get even worse. I fear that year after year we get closer to something even more terrifying.

I love you.

I now crave the river, I worship it for its calm.

Freezing, it pulls out the burning sorrow.

The wailing is silent, the water is loud and gurgling.

The coldness stings like razor blades and from each piercing tickle a string of nerves unwind in the waters.

The release is only temporary, my body oozes feelings like barbed wires.

We both know we are walking a dark path,

At least I remember the old happiness.

Maybe now the river recalls it too.

If I let go I would be happy,

Does it change anything that I don't?

I feel like the birds are staring at me again...

Voyeurs! they like feeling superior.

artist's biography

Nils Alix-Tabeling was born in 1991 in Paris (France). He lives and works in Montargis (France). He is represented by Piktogram, Warsaw (Poland) et Public Gallery, London (United Kingdom).

He is a graduate of the Royal College of Art in London (UK) and the Ecole nationale supérieure des arts visuels La Cambre, Brussels (Belgium).

His work is regularly shown in solo and group exhibitions abroad, notably in Düsseldorf, Dortmund, Cologne, London, Geneva, Warsaw, Brussels, New York, Prague, Vienna and Stockholm, and in France at the art centres Le cac in Brétigny, La Ferme du Buisson in Noisiel, le moco in Montpellier and le Parvis, Scène Nationale in Tarbes.

nils alix-tabeling off-site

Three art centres in the Centre-Val de Loire region are offering an artistic journey around the work of Nils Alix-Tabeling: the cccod (Tours), Le Garage (Amboise) and l'ar[T]senal (Dreux).

with the support of
DRAC Centre-Val de Loire in the context
of the programme « Mieux produire, mieux diffuser »

LE GARAGE
CENTRE D'ART
AMBOISE



> *Circonscrire le cœur*, solo show
Le Garage centre d'art d'Amboise
du 26.04 au 15.06.2025

> *Co-existence*, group show
Centre d'art ar[T]senal, Dreux
du 03.10.2025 au 15.03.2026

tours

> flash visits in English
(during summer) : Wednesday and
Saturday, 11:30 am (15 min)

access

Jardin François 1^{er}
37000 Tours
T +33 (0)2 47 66 50 00
F +33(0)2 47 61 60 24
contact@cccod.fr

opening

from Wednesday to Sunday 11 am-6pm
Saturday until 7pm



www.cccod.fr

