Barking Spider
CREATIVE

Understory

ARTISTS
Penelope Bartlau
Jason Lehane

SITE
In the basement of Château d'Orquevaux, the original kitchen remained in disuse for many years. This kitchen was, and as a kitchen is in any home, a source of nourishment and of pleasure-making - off the back of intensive planning, preparation, skill, and hard work. In June 2023, Australian installation and performance artists Penelope Bartlau and Jason Lehane discovered that the kitchen is about to be renovated and requested to use this for their site-specific work. They hope that *Understory* created a fitting, poetic and political swansong to this beautiful space.

SPARK
On the first weekend at the residency, an incident occurred where a small number of the artists confronted Lorine, the weekend cook, in the upstairs kitchen. They demanded "better and more" vegetarian food, and that "the meat eaters be told not to touch the vegetarian fare". They spoke rapidly, aggressively and in English. Lorine is French. This moment of injustice ignited Bartlau and Lehane's desire to create *Understory*.

CHATEAU D'ORQUEVAUX & HISTORY
Chateau d'Orquevaux estate's history outlines the many owners, including the current - Ziggy Attias, a visionary Châtelain since 2016. In most histories we hear and learn of the "glory stories": those of the high achievers and (predominantly male) leaders. What we don't usually hear about, and which is much harder to uncover, are the hidden, lost or barely recorded stories, of the behind-the-scenes workers behind any site, institution or even rock star. This is parallel with a forest. The canopy of the trees is often what we most often admire, and we fail to notice the humus, mosses, lichens, and everything else in a forest's understory that enables the trees to flourish.

PREMISE
Reflecting the beauty of the Orquevaux forests surrounding the Chateau d'Orquevaux estate, *Understory* explores an underworld, by drawing a parallel between a kitchen of a grand estate with a forest: the upper stories of each garner attention, the base and underworld of each is often overlooked. *Understory* is a work that peeks at the underground and the hidden heroes that can be discovered.

UNDERSTORY – INSTALLATION

Elements of the understory of a forest: moss, lichen, dead branches, piles of autumn leaves, snail shells, feathers, a broken eggshell, animal skulls and twigs have taken over the larder/preparation space in the disused downstairs kitchen of Chateau d'Orquevaux. Onions and onion skins are also littered throughout the space, as if forgotten and abandoned by a cook from long ago. There is an old display cabinet, buried on the floor underneath kitchen shelving, with an assemblage of bones, small black and gold lightshades, a long, antique, brass, car-horn with a dragon head, with a ruby-red gleaming eye. A bone-dry, deep-green, cast-iron Venus fountain perches above a shallow, marble sink – the area filled with moss, lichen, twigs, onions/skins, a violin bow and a live snail (we never know where it will appear next…). On a top shelf, there is a bird in a cage – motionless and in waiting, under a sheer night-blanket. The space is dimly lit, with light sources obscured through the use of natural and other objects arranged from floor to ceiling in this small area. Using coloured water in numerous abandoned/found preserving jars, Bartlau has manipulated light to flow through the jars, to create a sense of the underworld, and of the uncanny.

Throughout the kitchen-larder forest understory is an assortment of glassware: vases, glass bowls, a pair of broken champagne glasses etc. The preserving jars contain weird, indiscernible objects and things in various states of decay. As these are back and underlit, the jars' odd assemblage of contents are barely discernible through the pink, yellow, crimson, off-white, brown, teal and green water-light of each.

There is another type of preservation occurring in these jars: it appears as though someone has been collecting and preserving dreams, nightmares, and memories. This "collector" has been composing these into assemblages from images, text and patterns taken from old books. Each jar-assemblage is a miniature stage. Each is underlit, and the viewer can perceive a scene from a drama played out: each has a scene in which there are characters set against a backdrop. Some scenes are surreal in content, with uncanny and odd inclusions, and these in particular make up the nightmare assemblages. Jason Lehane, creator of these dream, nightmare, and memory jar-assemblages, has labelled each jar in French, in a handwritten, antique-style font he discovered in the Orquevaux graveyard. Using theatre lighting gels, he has manipulated the lights within each jar to add to the ghoulish effect.

To compliment the themes held within the jar-assemblages, Bartlau, artist responsible for the large-scale components of the *Underworld* installation, created two impressions of a shadow forest that the viewer could perceive from the kitchen-larder. Each impression was installed in glass windows that overlooked the kitchen-larder. One impression was created using dead tree branches, suspended in and backlit from an adjacent outside room with a green-gelled light fitting, throwing the branches' shadows onto semi-translucent paper (which appeared green) adhered to the glass. For the other, a longer panelled window, Bartlau created a large-scale papercut of a branch of a tree, split into seven separate panels of sheer brown paper (to fit the 7 window panels). The paper cut panels were adhered to the glass of the other adjacent room. The panels had a semi-translucent white paper backing, so that the branches, appear white on a dark background. These paper-cut branches were designed to evoke a sense of menace, The twigs at the end of the branches were subtly shaped in the form of claw-like fingers, reflecting the shapes of dead branches installed across the two rooms of the *Understory* installation. Dead branches hovered across the ceiling of the larder-kitchen, their presence "leaking" into the main kitchen space to create the sense of other-worldly-ness and foreboding. Lehane created a chiaroscuro lighting effect in the main kitchen space, by blacking out the exterior, natural-light sources, and controlling where the viewer's eyes should move to. Lehane sourced lamps and other lighting from around the Chateaux property, to create an evocative and subtle lighting effect.

Sounds of people walking and working upstairs could be heard through the floorboards, and the water pump which came on intermittently and randomly adding a haunting, melancholic quality to the site's sound palette.

Artists hid a small speaker which played forest sounds, making the space feel alive with nature: nature reclaiming and inhabiting an abandoned site. Also hidden in the kitchen was a servants bell and bell ringing system using cord and pulleys so that the "upstairs bell ring" could be controlled by an actor (Lehane) in two different positions adding to the audience impression that there was an unseen person making demands upstairs.

To enter the installation, people came downstairs from within the Chateau, and passed through a section of underground passageway. The passageway was designed to evoke qualities of the work prior to the audience's entry to the kitchen and larder areas. This part of the assemblage took advantage of the existing, defunct old dumbwaiter. Bartlau dressed the dumbwaiter with found objects, and the passageway with leaves and dead branches. The area was lit with an existing but blue-gelled light. This passageway complimented the main installation areas, suggestive of the humans past and ghosts present.

Understory installation footage can be viewed at https://vimeo.com/barkingspider/understory?share=copy









UNDERSTORY – PERFORMANCE

Two ghoulish characters are seated in opposite corners of the kitchen. They each wear an invention of a servant uniform but are barefoot. They appear asleep, but are in fact, in a constant state of readiness - like parents of a new-born baby, there is a sense of never-sleep, never-rest for the pair. At any time, the servant's bell, like a baby's cry, can launch them to action. The ghoulish chefs are summoned by the people of the upper story of the house to prepare a response to "an embarrassing situation involving certain vegetarians". After this vegetarian nightmare "cauchemar des vegetarians" is prepared and preserved in a jar, it's sent off upstairs in the dumbwaiter outside the kitchen. The two characters finish as they had begun when the audience first encounters them, in the same positions of never-sleep and ever-waiting.

Using a high style of comedic theatre, to devise the work *Understory* Bartlau and Lehane employed techniques of Commedia Dell'Arte and Le Coq. Both styles, (Commedia and Le Coq) find their roots in political satire.
The choice of these theatrical forms compliments the work's content:
Using comedy to poke fun at us (the audience) and reveal social injustice, *Understory* is a political comment on historic class constructs and modern-day privilege.

Understory performance footage can be viewed at https://vimeo.com/barkingspider/understoryghouls

Filmed by Ziggy Attias, at Château d'Orquevaux, France, 2023, this short, devised performance was co-created by artists Penelope Bartlau and Jason Lehane.



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