



Zoe Williams, *Algol's Mistress*, 2021, glazed ceramic, 19 5/8 × 18 7/8 × 8 5/8".

Zoe Williams

CIACCIA LEVI, PARIS • MILAN

Voracious green-and-purple creepers infested Zoe Williams's recent show, evoking predatory tubers and feelers. The show's title, "Tendresse Tendril," pointed to the artist's interest in etymological roots as well as physical ones. Both words come from the Latin *tener*, which means "soft" or "delicate." While tenderness was not always obvious in the works on view, tendrils ran rampant—sprouting up in the form of sea anemones (real and digitally animated), Medusa-like ceramic locks, and long wormy glass tears.

The centerpiece of the show was the seven-minute video *Tendresse Tendril (Worms' Meat)* (all works 2021), whose soundtrack paired a haunting original score by London-based sound and visual artist Susu Laroche with a recitation of a speech from Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. In the monologue, Mercutio invokes Queen Mab (a diminutive fairy who travels in a hazelnut-shell "chariot" pulled by a "grey-coated gnat" and scurries "over sleeping humans, haunting their dreams and infecting their deepest desires"); Williams accompanies Laroche's reading with footage of a giantess (Williams herself, though we

don't see her face, clad in fishnets and high heels) tromping through the muddy terrain and small rock pools of Cornwall, UK. But rather than this imposing figure, the undulant inhabitants of those aquatic microbiomes—anemones known as snakelocks—were what seemed to embody the sprite's wily and infectious energy. In the video's final scene, these snakelocks envelop a gold coin, covering it completely with their poisonous, purple-tipped tentacles. The potentially toxic effects of such an embrace were not revealed in the video but could be seen in the sculptures on view, which appeared like artifacts wrested out of Mab's world into ours.

Two glazed-ceramic portrait busts, *Algol's Maid* and *Algol's Mistress*, closely resembled the androgynous long-haired figures decorating the coins in Williams's video. In both sculptures, what initially read as green tresses (albeit with telltale mauve tips) cascade down to their shoulders and spill out of their mouths and eye sockets like maggots on rotting flesh. *Algol's Confidant*, a similar wall-mounted ceramic head, was an even more extreme vision of decay. Here, snakelocks anemones spread across a severely eroded face, and moss sprouts forth from deep gouges in its cheek and forehead. Though undeniably grisly, these cohorts of Algol ("demon's head" in Arabic, and the name of a star in the constellation of Perseus sometimes referred to as "the winking eye of Medusa") also described regeneration. Offering up an ecological interpretation of the wicked Gorgon with snakes for hair, Williams presented anemones as tender partners in the natural process of decomposition, which enables new growth to take root.

Another moment of tenderness came from a pair of crying eyes mounted on the wall. Made from fused Murano glass, *Tendresse gaze votives (wrath)* recalls the evil-eye beads produced by many cultures and believed to provide protection to those who wear or carry them. The fact that Williams's version appeared to be shedding long green purple-tipped tears gave her talisman a somewhat different assuasive function. Instead of pretending to ward off Queen Mab, Algol, Medusa, or any other evil spirit, these brimming eyes expressed empathic concern for the unpleasant but inevitable transition from human to worms' meat to fertilizer for new plant life.

— Mara Hoberman