

KÖNIG GALERIE

FRIEDRICH KUNATH
SENSITIVE EURO MAN

15 AUGUST – 18 OCTOBER 2020
ST. AGNES | NAVE

KÖNIG GALERIE is proud to present Friedrich Kunath's first solo show in the NAVE of St. Agnes, starting on 15 August 2020, and his first solo show in Germany since 2016. The collection of previously unseen works includes an oversized sculpture.

German Romanticism is the most German of all German art ideas. It is the expression of, and opposition to, emergent modernism, and probably the last rearguard action against the relentless advance of progress, enlightenment and industrialisation. It addressed the Dialectic of Enlightenment 150 years before Horkheimer and Adorno did.

The deep connection between the art of painting and seemingly harmonious cultural landscapes at imminent risk of destruction from the 'blessing' of progress first came to light when their beauty seemed. And it is this pain of parting that has sustained German culture for over 200 years. It is the soul of the German soul and, in its perversity, brokenness and radicalness, it connects with any political persuasion. In his work, Friedrich Kunath cites German Romanticism as he sees it in his Californian rear-view mirror: having left his homeland for the far, far west, he views it from a place where only a surrogate Romanticism exists. In Westerns, the wilderness is threatening, a place of doom; in John Ford's *The Searchers*, it provides the backdrop for a radical void, for an adventure trail in the search for meaning; and its radical isolation is the sole element unifying Ethan Edwards and the lonely Monk by the Sea. So whilst the German romantic seeks refuge in nature, the Western hero is challenged by it and seeks to escape.

Friedrich Kunath has no belief in Romanticism, yet artistically he remains under its aegis. From the writings of Schlegel, he learned about irony as a fundamental aesthetic principle of Romanticism. Romantic irony is the conceptual abyss to this subjectivist art form: its meta-level or double floor – or both. In Romantic art, irony has its own characters and tricks, such as the *Buffo*, or clown and light-hearted deconstructor in opera, and the *Parabase*, a level of reflection specially introduced into a work identifying the artist, conditions, and principles of its creation and subject.

When irony switches to deep sincerity, it becomes a philosophical heavyweight. "Perfect irony ceases to be irony and becomes earnest", wrote the young Schlegel. Having converted to Catholicism, Schlegel died a proud reactionary who sought a return to a hierarchical society, in much the same way as Romantic painting went into reverse – only gaudier – with the Nazarenes.

Everything is process. Nothing is true. Everything is subjective. The path is a goal. And with Kunath, there is a moment when he releases a picture to mature on its own, to finish creating itself. To him, a painting is good when the artist chose the right moment to let go. Navigating a labyrinth of false emotions, he seeks an exit from the surrogate Romanticism, often leaving his pictures to reverse out of the maze for themselves.

On this journey, Kunath sees every means as justifiable. He becomes overly saccharine, undermines, scuppers, executes, twists and exaggerates, fights and fights back.. – but still the primal sense of the longing remains, outlasting everything, indestructible. And that's the miracle: Kunath places the crash test dummy alongside Schlegel's *Buffo*. Time and again, he leaves his paintings to collide head on with the same wall of naïve art-is-beauty-is-perfection-pathos. Everything remains a fragment. Only when they have documented their crash and its impact are his pictures – fragments – complete.

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In the race for the autonomy of art, classic modernism fielded two philosophers – the utterly caustic Marcel Duchamp and Francis Picabia – in contention against the immediacy of what is sensed and thought. Picabia especially laughed, cried and dreamed in quotation marks, and in the pictures of Kunath, every false, gummed-up feeling is followed by a break that illuminates the space behind the phoniness.

With Kunath, a sequential transmission of emotional samples rattles through his pictures at breakneck speed. There is no straight route conveying what is real and/or real feelings any more. Our global visual culture has boiled almost every visual signal down to an emoji, and it's into this tornado of representations that Kunath flees. He drifts – with paradoxes, sarcasm and bar humour – from the sublime into the void. And yet every single painting, drawing and installation suggests a pathway that began with the longing for a Romantic feeling. "Why does melancholia require exterior infinity?" reads the brief, diary-like reflection at the bottom of the painting *A Shady Paste of White*, (2012). None of Kunath's works features an intact communication landscape. Far more, Kunath applies Schlegelian irony like a hooligan, destroying everything needed by a type of idyll, contemplation, bourgeois-idealist cultural consumption routine. He is like the beaver in his installation/sculpture that has gnawed one of the four legs of a barstool down to radical fragility. It is impossible to get comfortable in or with his works. Kunath f***s the observer with a friendly smile. After all, "not every clown belongs in the circus", as it says beneath the image *Wenn ein Mensch Lebt (When a Man Lives)*.

The contemporary paradigm of communication is that it has become even more improbable than Niklas Luhmann had assumed. Mass media and a monstrous cultural-industrial complex have robbed speaking, writing, painting and filming of their innocence. And with each cultural shift, contemporary art follows with ever more abstract derivations. The first derivation were Duchamp and Picabia, the second was Warhol, the third Richter, Polke and Kippenberger, and Kunath is now daring to be the fourth. Every mathematician knows things can get complicated, often enough with 'zero' as the result. Need an example? Longing for love in total isolation and complete hopelessness. Derivation 1: Illustrate the feeling with pretty clichés. Derivation 2: Cite references to pop culture, e.g. by integrating a pop song into an installation as a video or audio track. Derivation 3: Write in a section of the lyrics from a song by someone like Morrissey. Derivation 4: Friedrich Kunath writes: Morrissey Lyrics. (Derivation 5: Turn the two RRs of the singer into the initials of Rolls-Royce.) I dreamed it was a dream... that you were gone. Kunath floats through derivation 4, has loosened up and is dancing.

Ultimately, in the end, when all is said and done, it really is sheer Romanticism after all. When all that other stuff – the disruptive, stupid, shitty, f***ed up, gummed up stuff, – receives the absolute caustic treatment of deconstruction, all that's left to see is simple happiness. NOW IT'S JUST YOU AND ME, reads the torn-off note a car rental company. Or the sculpture of one burial cross lovingly embracing another.

Kunath's big heart has his mind to use as a death strip, to keep everything safe in the heart or soul, in the ideal – and only in the ideal. But after all his dozens and hundreds of pictures, you see there's quite a lot to them, behind them. And for everybody who gains an interest in this fantastic work, the art is the wall they can – and want to – climb over. That takes effort, but it's a laugh. And after 100 years of solitude, you find yourself alone on a beautiful beach in the sunset. And yes, there's someone else there too. So simple.

Text: Ulf Poschardt

Friedrich Kunath (*1974) was born in Chemnitz, Germany, and lives and works in Los Angeles. His painting is inspired by German Romanticism and American pop culture in equal measure. Kunath studied at the University of Arts in Braunschweig but decided soon afterwards to leave Germany. His oeuvre includes not only paintings but also sculptures and installations, through which he explores recurring themes such as longing, loneliness, euphoria and fear. Kunath's works have already been exhibited in solo shows at various renowned institutions including Sammlung Philara in Düsseldorf, the Kunsthalle Bremerhaven, the Sprengel Museum in Hanover, the Schinckel Pavillon in Berlin, the Hammer Museum Los Angeles, the Kunsthalle in Baden-Baden, and the Aspen Art Museum. In 2012 he was awarded the Sprengel Prize for fine arts, presented by the Sparkassen Foundation of Lower Saxony.

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