

Kati Heck
Bonnie Bonne Bon

1 Davies Street W1
Opening June 2021

Man has been inextricably linked to – and enamoured with – horses for time immemorial. And horses have had to fill in where men were weak or incapable, which puts the horse on an equal footing with women.

– Kati Heck, 2021

In her second exhibition with Sadie Coles HQ, Kati Heck presents a new group of paintings and drawings which centre on the motif of the horse – both as an historical revenant and a metaphor for the human psyche. In precisely executed yet open-ended scenes, she subverts the traditional associations of the subject – above all, the horse as a symbol of masculine power and prestige – and reconceives it as an expression of feminine resistance.



Heck's new paintings hang on free-standing triangles of metal pipes, seemingly transposed off the gallery walls so as to hang mid-air. The ingrained symbolism of the horse is likewise transposed into surreal, allegoric scenarios. In one scene, *Macht, los*, a horse with a flowing mane is imagined driving its hooves into the ground, arrested mid-gallop, although the wooden prosthesis in one of its legs betrays a concealed artifice that undercuts the romantic aura. In another work, a pony struggles under the weight of man in a vest (a kind of modern-day Bacchus), while in the background, a friezelike scene of cavalry and nude soldiers suggests a more elevated 'classical' genre.

Heck's images continually shift, in this way, between different ambiances and associations. In the process, the majesty and bravado of historical precursors – the portraits of George Stubbs, for instance, or the ubiquitous formula of the king mounted on horseback – splinter into ambiguous shades of meaning. "Throughout history the image of the horse has been used as a symbol of power and powerlessness," she has commented. "Kings upon stallions, paupers without one. They have often used to support or even *prove* the manliness of men. Man's idea of horses comprise power, *cavalerie*, *work*, transportation, wealth, status. But the horse is a symbol of female power."

In *Bonnie Bonne Bon – come on, sense!*, a group of figures congregate around a white horse – a serene, seated creature with a cluster of breasts that invokes the many-breasted (*polymastos*) incarnation of the goddess Artemis. Compositionally, the picture is based on Goya's *Witches' Sabbath* (1798), a scene of witches worshipping the devil. Heck transforms the mystical otherworld of her source (with its undercurrent of medieval misogyny) into an incongruous compound of lucid naturalism and phantasmagoria. The faces of the human acolytes, most of them young children, are rendered in a crystalline style similar to that of German *Neue Sachlichkeit* painting of the 1920s. Smaller details – such as the hand of one girl, which emits flames – produce ripples in the surface realism.

The horse motif has its origins in a drawing that the artist made years ago, where an image of a horse in a pose of refusal was accompanied by the labels *Macht* ('power') and *Los* ('loose'), terms that combine into *Machtlos* ('powerless'). Allied to the theme of female power is that of motherhood, which finds expression in a portrait of the artist's mother (*Mutter I*) and more obliquely in a portrait of a mare's head surrounded by small, fairytale-like vignettes (*Mutter II*): the horse serves not merely as an emblem of resistance but as a fertilising force – a bud formation.

Heck's paintings are configured as an architectural environment, at the centre of which is a pyramid-like sculpture formed out of orbs of horse manure, elevated on a dais of white eggs. A literalisation of the paintings' equine motif, the object recaptures the images' competing registers – literal, symbolic, comedic and meticulously formalist. These different aspects are compressed in the drawings on display upstairs – works in gouache which combine into a cast of animal and human personae. Horses appear in various guises (one of them carrying a human cargo in the barrel of its abdomen), together with knights in shining armour and – by comic contrast – a man's sweating head, supported by tiny legs.

Kati Heck (b. 1979, Düsseldorf) lives and works in Pulle, Belgium. She has exhibited internationally, with solo shows including *Hauruck d'Orange*, GEM museum voor actuele kunst, The Hague (2020); *Heimlich Manoeuvre*, Sadie Coles HQ, London (2017); *Holy Hauruck*, M HKA, Antwerp, Belgium (2016); *KOPF = KOPFNUSS*, CAC Malaga, Spain (2013); *Solanum Tuberosum. Tauben sprechen kein Deutsch*, Atelierschiff der Stadt, Frankfurt (2010); *Bonzenspeck und Prollgehab*, Museum Het Domein, Sittard, Netherlands (2008). Recent group exhibitions include *Risquons-Tout*, WIELS Centre for Contemporary Art, Brussels (2020); *QUADRO*, Deichtorhallen Hamburg, Hamburg (2020); *Salon de Peinture*, M HKA, Museum of Contemporary Art Antwerp, Antwerp (2019); *50 years Middelheim Promotors*, Middelheim Museum, Antwerp (2015) and *Happy Birthday Dear Academie*, MAS, Antwerp (2013). A monograph was published on her work in 2016 by Hatje Cantz; and in 2020 *Kati Heck: Hauruck* was published by Hannibal.

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