

KETELEER GALLERY is very pleased to present *Environmental Portraits*, a solo exhibition by John Kørner (°1967. Aarhus, Denmark). The artist's second exhibition with the gallery consists of an entirely new series of paintings and sculptures.

For over 20 years, John Kørner has been building an impressive oeuvre of paintings, ceramics, large scale installations, video, glass works,... that have been shown across the world. His typically brightly coloured, phantasmagorical works are meant to be alluring to the eye while simultaneously touching upon pressing societal and environmental concerns. He merges the abstract with the figurative, suggestive narratives with dreamlike impressions to draw the viewer in to take a second look at what's truly happening in the works and in the world around us.

With *Environmental Portraits*, Kørner created something quite different than the classical landscape or portrait and breaks the genres free from their familiar connotations. His works are to be considered reimagined 'portraits' of fluid, psychedelic universes. He started this series by exploring the underwater world, researching formations, colours and movements that are uniquely found in these aquatic regions. But as his process continued, the works evolved to contain more than this single dimension. The underwater world soon transgressed into the world above and to his delight, he discovered he could create a new kind of space. A space that's not a literal waterscape and is located simultaneously under and above the waterline. Some works have a vertical line that could be considered a horizon, yes, but they go beyond the static landscape. They're *environments* that are and contain changing entities, fluidly moving inside a space - a metaphor for the changing climate we're facing today. To Kørner, the climate crisis has brought a whole new and irreversible dimension into the landscape genre and thus making a landscape painting has become equivalent to speaking up about environmental issues.

All the works in the exhibition are to be understood together, as a whole, supporting each other in having the same ambience and being part of a complete *environment* experience in which you can seamlessly glide from one scene into the next. And his work process reflects this interconnectedness: he starts with a few paintings at the same time and works on them simultaneously, transferring the same 'vibe' to all the works. To create a fluid movement in and between the works, he used a lot of water to bring a vibrant and warm colour palette of yellow, green and red to life, and the main character in all this is yellow. One of his favourite colours throughout his career got a bit of an update for this new series: where he would usually use a brighter shade in the past, now, the yellow has become warmer, containing more red, to create a 'dizzy vibe' as he puts it. The yellow is a strong presence throughout the exhibition, tying all the works together even more, making up entire skies or core colours of some of the *bubbles*: central upright colour clusters that emerge as characters in the scenes.

For this exhibition, Kørner also revisits one of his most recurring themes: *Problems*, egg-shaped entities that have consistently popped up over the years both in his paintings and as physical sculptures. As a deliberate visual oversimplification of the complexity that all problems truly hold, Kørner's enigmatic *Problem* has become a critical element in his entire oeuvre. Over the last 20 years, Kørner highlighted a myriad of complex issues with his *Problems* ranging from climate problems, refugee crises, global terrorism, man's internal troubles,... From brightly coloured human-sized problems sleeping in beds or running on a track (Museum Dhondt-Dhaenens 2018), to smaller glass versions huddled up in a boat (Espoo Museum of Modern Art, 2018 & Artipelag, 2014), ceramics displayed in cabinets or surfing a carpeted wave installation, abstract blotches in paintings, sculptural scenography for a theatre play (*GREED*,

2016), more figuratively painted versions and so on... all these *Problems* have one thing in common: they loom over us. They announce themselves as an uncanny presence, as an elephant in the room, demanding our attention.

Problems are found everywhere, in everyone's life and in all sorts of guises and, as illustrated here with *Bubble Problem I, II and III*, often contain a cluster of other problems. All problems, however, are also paradoxically highly appealing. Kørner is fascinated by the fact that people can't seem to be able to look away from them. Whether it be a traffic accident, an obsessive interest in WWII, watching crime scene investigations on tv... people are intrigued by troubles and tragedies (from a safe distance of course) and that's why Kørner adorns his *Problems* with alluring colours, stolen from fruits and flowers, mimicking their naturally seductive properties. Just like a ripe, juicy, yellow pear hanging from a tree, people are strongly attracted to problems; it's a deeply rooted, instinctive reaction.

In *A Long Bubble* and *Big Bubble* we find another recurring element: the Adidas 'Spezial' shoe, Kørner's favourite shoe of all times. Launched in the seventies as a handball shoe, it is engraved in Kørner's childhood memories. Handball originated in Denmark and is one of its most popular pastimes (since it can be played indoors during long winter times). This iconic first indoor shoe became popularised worldwide afterwards to wear as an everyday shoe. Kørner thinks of the Spezial shoe as a quintessential part of our recent history, a true pop culture item, and that's why he inserts it now and then in his paintings, like an idiosyncratic intruder though strong symbolic token for our western culture.

Kørner likes to transgress the edges of rationality, appealing to the subliminal, illusory and primal realms of our minds. In all his works, one-dimensional thinking went out the window to allow for more free association, emotive reactivity and symbolic potential. His works are never random aesthetic images, however. With his generously layered though translucent strokes of colour, reminiscent of water colour sketches, and his powerful understanding of the subconscious language, Kørner's mesmerising *fata morgana*s are ultimately meant to open our eyes.

*Lauren Wiggers, 2023.*

The exhibition will be on view 2 December 2023 – 6 January, 2024.