

Press Release

Astrid Klein

January 13–February 24, 2024
Public Reception: January 12, 6–8pm
Sprüth Magers, New York

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Astrid Klein, one of Germany's most distinguished conceptual artists, has played a crucial role as a European counterpart to the American Pictures Generation since the late 1970s and is considered a female pioneer of large-scale photography. Underpinned by the formal and aesthetic principles of collage, Klein's practice examines, deconstructs, and renews the relationship between image and text to question prevailing power structures and modes of perception and representation. In her multilayered works, she combines artistic source material drawn from philosophy, literature, political discourse, and film to establish fresh links of meaning. Sprüth Magers is pleased to present Astrid Klein's first solo exhibition in New York, which focuses on two historical bodies of work: early "photoworks" (1979) alongside canvases from her *White Paintings* (1988–93) that together showcase the core ideas of her alluring and complex oeuvre.

Entering the gallery, visitors encounter well-known faces: the glamorous women of 1960s and 1970s French New Wave and Italian cinema. Klein has detached them from their original context in film and mass media and merged them into new pictorial worlds by overlaying them with text fragments, adhesive tape elements, and pen markings. The process results in photographed collages, so-called photoworks, all shown for the first time in the US.

The women depicted are distinguished by their sensual femininity and erotic appeal. Many played female leads in culture-defining films, often performing as objects of desire but, above all, portrayed as sexually emancipated characters. Klein's photoworks deliberately emphasize this paradoxical characterization, but also the women's inherent strength. By isolating them as independent figures, she highlights that their power originates from within and is not contingent on external circumstances – their beauty is an aspect of their identity rather than dictated by societal expectations.

A striking example is *Untitled (je ne parle pas, ...)* (1979), featuring two depictions of Brigitte Bardot. One faces the viewers frontally, while the other twists around, casting a coquettish glance over her right shoulder. This bodily torsion creates a sculptural, multi-perspectival quality and emphasizes the curvy female attributes, while the inner rotation presents the figure as a dynamic and autonomous entity. At the same time,

both figures maintain direct eye contact with the viewers, generating a quivering tension between the women's allure and subtle distance. The work has a palpable sense of movement, bringing the dynamic nature of film into the static medium of photography. Klein's characteristic overlay of text in Courier font, reminiscent of typewritten film scripts or manuscripts, further underscores an allusion to cinematic storytelling. The letter X has been a recurring symbol in her work from the start, expressing the pictorial nature of language within its manifold meaning, as it stands for underlining, crossing out, a placeholder or, through its visual association with a cross-stitch, for the principle of montage.

Klein challenges conventional modes of perception. Her motifs instinctively captivate us, while also making us complicit with the male gaze upon the female body. These 1970s photoworks therefore reflect the shifting perspectives of that time, influenced by the second-wave feminist movement. Yet the artist does not admonish; she rather shows by skillfully utilizing ubiquitous, fundamental elements of societal constructs to draw attention to facets of the human experience. In a highly sensual manner, Klein employs her deeply conceptual approach to unveil hidden structures.

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Alongside the photoworks, visitors encounter the tranquil atmosphere of several large-scale *White Paintings* (1988–93). Drawing inspiration from artists such as Agnes Martin, Piero Manzoni, and Robert Ryman, Klein extends their minimal approach and combines white-on-white painting with textual elements, tape, and, in some cases, silver-colored foil that acts as a mirror of sorts – an unreliable one that fails to return a steady reflection. The resulting nuanced layers imply depth that echoes the intricacies of cognition, perception, memory, and forgetting. Like an orchestrated collection of fragmented thoughts, these works persistently confront us, inviting us into a moment of ambiguity and contemplation where unanswered questions intertwine with the imagination. Also painted with alabaster, the canvases evoke a sculptural dimension, essentially demonstrating that the artist conceives her works not in a two-dimensional but in a three-dimensional, spatial manner. In *Untitled (tragicmagic)* (1988/93), for example, painted shapes resemble a curtain that merges into the white background, an invitation to imagine a space beyond.

These two historical bodies of work illustrate the fundamental importance of collage to Astrid Klein's practice, the versatility of her thinking and her innovative reinterpretation of the image, particularly through the incorporation of text. A testimony to her works' intellectual acuity and lasting relevance, Klein's dialogue with social and political developments, and her engagement with themes such as the construction of identity and sexuality, remain as current today as ever.

Astrid Klein (*1951, Cologne) lives and works in Cologne. Selected solo exhibitions include Fuhrwerkswaage, Cologne (through January 2024), Sammlung Falckenberg, Deichtorhallen Hamburg (2018), The Renaissance Society, Chicago (2017), KW Institute for Contemporary Art, Berlin (2005), Contemporary Art Center, Vilnius (2003), Hamburger Bahnhof, Berlin (2002), Neues Museum, Nuremberg (2001), Kunsthalle Bielefeld (1989), travelling exhibition by the Kestnergesellschaft, Hanover; ICA, London; Vienna Secession and Forum Stadtpark, Graz (all 1989), and the Museum of Contemporary Art, Seoul (1981). Klein participated in the 14th Sharjah Biennial (2019), documenta 8 (1987), and the 42nd Venice Biennale (1986). Her works are in collections such as SF MoMA, Tate, National Museum of Art Osaka and Museum Ludwig, Cologne.

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