

Esther Schipper

Julius von Bismarck

Zwei Wölfinnen

April 26 – June 15, 2024



Julius von Bismarck, **Zwei Wölfinnen (Im Wolfspelz)**, 2024, wood, fur, winches, controllers, wooden plinth, 128 x 65 x 150 cm. Image © the artist

Esther Schipper is pleased to announce **Zwei Wölfinnen**, a presentation by Julius von Bismarck, whose representation was announced earlier this year. On view are two sculptures of she-wolves: one appears as a taxidermied animal, the other is formally based on the iconic classical bronze of a she-wolf in the Capitoline Museums in Rome.

Fierce creatures looming large in the humanity's imagination, wolves are endowed with distinct attributes in different cultures: seen as brutal and unrelenting, doltish or menacing, greedy and destructive, or implicated with witchcraft and magical transformation (werewolf) in some, others associate the animal with independence and freedom (lone wolf), courage and strength, cunning and intelligence. A recurring motif has the wolf turn protector and caregiver of a human infants: most famously, Zoroaster, Romulus and Remus, Rudyard Kipling's fictional character Mowgli—all were supposedly suckled by a she-wolf, raised by a pack of wolves.

Rendered nearly extinct in the late 18th and early 19th century, the fate of the wolf can be understood in a larger context of the domination of the natural world, specifically, as part of the Western European notion of the world as something to be domesticated, toiled upon, exploited. Increasingly demonized since the Middle Ages, Christianity emerges as major force in the demise of wolves, partially justified by the bible's use of the animal as a symbol of danger to the flock and, in the warning of false prophets who are "wolves in sheep's clothing," to the soul.

Conceived as a pair, Bismarck's two sculptures represent different aspects of lupine-human entanglement. **Zwei Wölfinnen (Im Wolfspelz)** at first looks the fierce creature, with its muscular body and rough coat, even as its posture slightly echoes that of its Roman companion. This echo hints at the essence of taxidermy: made from an animal skin drawn over a shape approximating a pose we may think of as typical, the taxidermied "animal" is a fantasy. Carved from wood, **Zwei Wölfinnen (Wilde Mutter)**, is modelled on a version of the Capitoline bronze of a she-wolf. A politicized hybrid of the human fascination with the wolf, the Etruscan bronze—distributed in multiple variations across Italian sculptural representations—became a symbol for the capital Rome when in the 15th century, bronzes of two infants were added—the mythological founding fathers, Romulus and Remus. Bismarck's sculpture leaves out the suckling infants, but the iconicity of the source lets observers almost unconsciously add them.

Then the illusion breaks—as with all taxidermied animals on closer inspection—when we see the large-scale figures collapse and reconfigure, revealing the elaborate construction that enables their continuous movement. A further development of Bismarck's series of monumental collapsing sculptures presented in the artist's solo exhibition at the Berlinische Galerie in 2023, the new works emulate the mechanism of hand-held push-puppet toys with miniature animals. Yet, the collapse of the animal's body into sections—and with it the dissolution of the initial illusion of the animal sculptures' intactness—brings with it a heady mix of power, curiosity and, as with many contemporary encounters with animals, pity and perhaps shame.

The format of Julius von Bismarck's sculptures—their echoing the toy's construction, anti-naturalistic awkward motions, and even the characteristic round base as plinth—has an anti-heroic effect: the imposing figures' continuous collapse is a choreographed study in powerlessness, turning the predator **Zwei Wölfinnen (Im Wolfspelz)** and the iconic cultural symbol **Zwei Wölfinnen (Wilde Mutter)** into jumbled dolls. But transformed in scale, the playfulness of its mechanistic source comes with a change in scale of the inferred violence. The laughter at the sculptures' unceremonious collapse becomes a symptom of our ambivalence at taking pleasure from this destruction and, in this realization, the wider consequences of humanity's relation to the world are revealed.

Zwei Wölfinnen then speaks to the core of Bismarck's practice: the question of how the notion of Nature has been constructed, in particular, how the conceptual separation of man from his surroundings, through naming, classifying, and creating systems, has gone hand in hand with the control and domination of the environment, with increasingly disastrous consequences, not only for the planet, but also, as a consequence of broader notions of human sovereignty, for the lives of other beings, human and non-human.

Concurrent with his presentation at Esther Schipper, Julius von Bismarck will have a solo exhibition at alexander levy.

Julius von Bismarck, born 1983 in Breisach am Rhein, Germany, grew up in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. He currently lives and works in Berlin and in Switzerland. The artist studied at the Berlin University of the Arts (2005-2013) and Hunter College, New York (2007). Julius von Bismarck received the Award of the Shifting Foundation, Beverly Hills (2018); IBB Photography Award, IBB Atrium, Berlin (2013); and Prix Ars Electronica Award, Linz (2009), among others. Julius von Bismarck's recent solo exhibitions and commissions include: **When Platitudes Become Form**, Berlinische Galerie. Museum für Moderne Kunst, Berlin (2023); **NEUSTADT** (with Marta Dyachenko), Emscherkunstweg, Duisburg (2021); **Feuer mit Feuer**, Bundeskunsthalle, Bonn (2020); **Art Club #28**, Villa Médicis – Académie de France à Rome, Rome (2019); **Baumanalyse**, Haus Mödrath – Räume für Kunst, Kerpen (2019); **Die Mimik der Tethys**, Palais de Tokyo, Paris (2019); **I'm afraid I must ask you to leave** (with Julian Charrière), Kunstpalais Erlangen, Erlangen (2018); **Gewaltenteilung**, Städtische Galerie Wolfsburg, Wolfsburg (2017); **Objects in mirror might be closer than they appear** (with Julian Charrière), Villa Bernasconi, Geneva (2016); **Fade Into You – A Series of Film Screenings**, Kunsthalle Mainz, Mainz (2016); **Tiere sind dumm und Pflanzen noch viel dümmer**, Kunstverein Göttingen, Göttingen (2015); **History Apparatus**, Kunstverein Arnsberg, Arnsberg (2014).

His work is held in the collections of various institutions including: Arken Museum, Ishøj; FRAC Alsace, Sélestat; Fundación Televisa, Mexico City; Kunsthalle Hamburg; Musac – Museo de Arte Contemporáneo de Castilla y León; Sammlung Philara, Düsseldorf; Sammlung zeitgenössischer Kunst der Bundesrepublik Deutschland, Bonn; Sprengel Museum Hannover, Hanover; and Stadtgalerie Wolfsburg.

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