

Henning Strassburger

HIGH

Opening: April 12th, 6 – 9 pm

April 12th – May 11th, 2024

Sies + Höke, Düsseldorf

In the exhibition *HIGH*, Sies + Höke presents new works by the Berlin-based artist Henning Strassburger. Known as one of the leading protagonists of his generation in the discourse on abstract painting, Strassburger integrates the insights gained from his previous works into a new cycle of paintings. Since 2020, representative elements are clearly recognisable in his series of grey paintings. These seemingly abstract lines are representative amplifications of figurative ink drawings, enlarged by the artist via projections directly onto the canvas. The supposedly spontaneous gesture of the line became a calculated and critical questioning of abstract painting. Christian Malycha described this as “manipulative markmaking”. The critical attitude towards pure gesture led Strassburger to an analytical abstraction that, with references to an external narration, elevated the image beyond the depicted to a more narrative level. The artist comments: “Gestural painting is only sexy in combination with youthfulness”.

In his new works, Strassburger focuses on this previously only insinuated narrative by introducing his alter ego ALPHAKENNY. The name of this alter ego arose from an anecdotal misunderstanding: In a New York Starbucks, his first name was mistakenly written as Kenny on the coffee cup waiting to be filled. In combination with the prefix Alpha-, which refers both ironically to the alpha leader and to the German insult ‘Alpha-Kevin’—referring to the loser in the schoolyard—the studio doppelgänger ALPHAKENNY emerges. The combination of macho and loser facilitates identification as well as critical self-reflection.

Strassburger accentuates this by painting his alter ego holding objects encountered in everyday life or of personal significance to him. In *Happy Meissner Porzellan* (2024), for example, ALPHAKENNY holds a cup with the famous blue crossed swords from Meissen, the artist’s birthplace. Red and green cacti drawn while traveling also appear, as does a Virgin Airlines plane window with a sunset on the way to Los Angeles in *Happy Virgin Air* (2024), and the corn-on-the-cob in *Happy Corn Trophy* (2024), as it grows en masse in the fields behind his second studio in the Eifel region. The painter also appears as a motif in various pictures such as *The Happy Painter* (2024), *El Pintor feliz* (2023), *Happy Brushstrokes* (2024) and *Happy Palette* (2024).

The composition of the new paintings is reminiscent of playing cards, whereby the figure and object are mirrored along the central axis. The motif is thus sometimes upside down, as is familiar from paintings by Georg Baselitz. In his cycle of *Heldenbilder* (Hero Paintings) from the 1960s, the artist took a critical approach to the supposed role models of his childhood and youth—later turning the figure on its head as the ultimate gesture. Like Baselitz, Strassburger shows anti-heroes in the true sense of the word. The various incarnations of ALPHAKENNY are each given the word ‘Happy’ in the title, as if happiness and contentment could be summoned or successfully persuaded to exist. They are multi-layered, critical self-portraits in which Strassburger questions his own role as an artist as well as his chosen—and for himself still new—figurative painting style.