

Esther Schipper

Norbert Bisky

Polympsest

June 12 – July 13, 2025

Esther Schipper, Berlin



Norbert Bisky, **Berliner Allee**, 2025, oil on canvas, 150 x 120 cm (59 x 47 1/4 in) (NBI 020). © the artist

Esther Schipper is pleased to announce **Polympsest**, Norbert Bisky's first solo exhibition with the gallery. On view will be all new paintings and a lamp sculpture.

Norbert Bisky has established a formal vocabulary in which bodies become representations of existential states. The title, **Polympsest**, a neologism composed from the word palimpsest and the prefix poly, already signals two main tenets of the new body of work. It emphasizes the plurality of influences and the layered iconography, which is a contemporary urban equivalent of the ancient practice of overwriting manuscripts, to which the word palimpsest originally referred.

Bisky's figures—painted in bright and seductive colors yet fragmented, falling, untethered—have always been a symbol of the precarious nature of man in totalitarian societies and under capitalism. The new paintings provide this intuited meaning with concrete narrative underpinnings: The young men have banded together in apparent conflict in some paintings or address the spectator directly; some appear to be shouting, others are masked, holding a Molotov cocktail in their hand, or gesture a gunshot. These paintings are of the here and now: they picture landmarks of Berlin life, some of which are threatened by gentrification or urban decay. They are a wakeup call by articulating a wider sociopolitical mood and the consequences of the state of polycrisis on psyche, society, or city—as exemplified by Berlin where the artist has lived since 1981.

The state of the city, and society at large, is represented by heady mix of quotations from urban life. The streets are alive in these paintings but also in a feverish dream of change, upheaval and decay. A recurring motif of these works are tromp l'oeil-like depictions of torn posters with parts of words or single letters of text remaining. The reference to the aesthetic of the French post-World War II artists known as "affichistes" (from French affiche meaning poster) is not only formal but conceptual, pointing to the larger context of that moment in the late 1950s and 1960s. The affichistes drew on Abstract expressionist aesthetics but grew out of the radical politics of reappropriation (détournement) and urban wanderings (dérive) of the Situationist International. Comics, signs, and fragments of street art also feature in Bisky's paintings, reiterating the hybridity of the urban environment, a living canvas of signs in constant flux.

Formally drawing on painting's history and its contemporary discourse, Bisky's works combine figurative and abstract elements. His figures are surrounded by painterly sections of thin translucent glazes applied in broad loose strokes. At times, they appear to delve into a sea of color or are partially obscured by sweeping patches. Some sections appear at first like raw canvas. A major theme of the current body work, then, is the ruin. With their deliberate play on an unfinished and fragmentary quality, the paintings evoke its history as elegiac motif in 18th and especially 19th century painting and architecture where ruins functioned as symbolic representation of the fleetingness of life and, more broadly, of civilizations.

Championing plurality over purity, the formal incorporation of a wide array of art historical and everyday life influences is understood as a political gesture at a time when personal, sexual, cultural, and political freedoms taken for granted—in the West, in Germany and Berlin—are under threat. The bright and playful aesthetic has a combative quality, not just in its narrative allusions to unrest but with its insistence on a socio-politically coded color scheme, with its purple blurs and pink, orange and baby blue defiantly celebrating an exuberant camp aesthetic. The message is clear: We need to be alert to the changes in our environments and take seriously the messages scrawled on the walls, the election posters ripped to shreds, and the slogans that threaten communities.

With its assemblage of urban fragments such as electrical boxes, trash cans, illuminated letters, doorbell panels, and streetlamps, the lamp sculpture installed at the center of the exhibition space further emphasizes the references to street life. The work was produced in collaboration with Lars Murasch.

Norbert Bisky was born 1970 in Leipzig, Germany. He studied painting at the Berlin University of the Arts in the class of Georg Baselitz; a year at the Universidad Complutense in Madrid and joined the class of Jim Dine in the Salzburg Summer Academy. He lives and works in Berlin and Andalusia.

From 2008 to 2010, Bisky was a visiting professor at the Geneva Academy of Fine Arts HEAD and from 2016 to 2018 at the Braunschweig University of Art.

Bisky's vivid imagery has also featured in the context of performing arts. In 2013, he created the stage design for the Staatsballett Berlin's performance of **Masse**, which took place in the Halle am Berghain. His work **Vertigo** has been permanently installed in the entrance area since May 2017. For the Stuttgart State Opera in cooperation with the Ludwigsburg Palace Festival, he directed and created the stage design for the play Die Schöne Müllerin in 2024. His series of works **Colaba** is part of the new collection presentation at the Staatsgalerie Stuttgart, This is Tomorrow.

The artist has had numerous international solo exhibitions, among them are: **Walküren**, Museum der Stadt Worms im Andreasstift, Worms (2024); **Im Freien**, Kunstverein Freunde Aktueller Kunst, Zwickau (2023); **Mirror Society**, SCAD Museum of Art, Savannah, Georgia (2022); **DISINFOTAINMENT**, G2 Kunsthalle, Leipzig (2021); **Berlin Sunday**, Le Confort Moderne, Poitiers (2020); **Pompa**, St. Matthäus-Kirche, Berlin (2019); **Rant**, Villa Schöningen, Potsdam (2019); **Balagan**, Bötzwow, Berlin (2015); **Zentrifuge**, Kunsthalle Rostock, Rostock (2014); **Special Report**, Kunsthalle Memmingen (2013); **A Retrospective of Ten Years of Painting**, Kunsthalle Marcel Duchamp, Cully (2011); **Norbert Bisky: Paintings**, Haifa Museum of Art (2009); **Mandelkern**, Dortmunder Kunstverein, Dortmund (2009); **ich war's nicht**, Haus am Waldsee, Berlin (2007).

Bisky's work is represented in the following collections: Hall Art Foundation, USA; The Museum of Modern Art, New York; Palm Springs Art Museum; National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, Seoul; The Israel Museum, Jerusalem; Le FNAC Fonds National d'Art Contemporain; Berlinische Galerie, Berlin; Brandenburgisches Landesmuseum für Moderne Kunst, Frankfurt (Oder); Deutsche Bank Collection, Frankfurt am Main; G2 Kunsthalle, Leipzig; Kunsthalle Rostock; Museum der Bildenden Künste, Leipzig; Museum Ludwig, Cologne; Schlossmuseum Murnau; Staatliche Kunsthalle Karlsruhe; Staatsgalerie Stuttgart; Staedel Museum, Frankfurt; Stiftung Kunstforum Berliner Volksbank; The MER Collection, Segovia.