

Press Release

Robert Elfgen

utopisch

May 2–August 1, 2026

Public reception: May 1, 6–9pm

Sprüth Magers, Berlin

Sprüth Magers

The work of Robert Elfgen explores the relationship between humankind and nature through a distinctly mythical, poetic lens. His assemblages, collages, light objects, and floor- and wall pieces are often arranged in room-filling installations that resemble walk-in paintings. On the occasion of Gallery Weekend Berlin, Sprüth Magers is pleased to present *utopisch*, a solo exhibition of new and recent works by Elfgen.

Contrast serves as a foundational principle in his practice, with industrial landscapes displayed alongside vistas of nature, images of animals, and magical creatures. For Elfgen, materials shape and direct the imagery that emerges – a principle evident in his choice of concrete, aluminium and brass, materials whose raw industrial origins parallel the factories and power plants they often depict. This responsiveness extends to his environment: his recent relocation to an eighteenth-century ruin – part of a former monastery outside a small town in Brittany – has brought new atmospheric qualities to his works, shaped by the region’s fast-changing weather and lighting conditions. In his paintings on wood, this sensitivity to both material and environment is especially evident: he layers wood stain, ink, and sparkling spray paint onto wooden supports, then sands them back in certain areas to reveal the grain. This natural pattern becomes integral to the image, transformed into elements such as overcast skies or fog drifting across a landscape. The visible grain lends the paintings a tactile quality, while Elfgen’s controlled use of colour and light imbues his subjects with a subtle romanticism.

The first of these works that viewers encounter, *Cigno Nero* (2026), sets the tone for the rest of the exhibition. Its title translates to “black swan,” used figuratively in Italian to describe an unforeseen event of great impact, perhaps referring to the billowing cloud of black ink above the abstracted power plant. The collage on concrete *Emilia* (2026) places a black-and-white photograph of a nuclear plant against a richly textured purple textile band, creating a striking contrast between industrial architecture and decorative fabric. Above, a pale atmospheric sky rendered in soft pinks and greys features a shiny circular element suggesting the sun or the moon. This surreal juxtaposition creates a dreamlike quality that questions the relationship between human technology and the natural world, gesturing toward the utopian possibility implied by the show’s title: an imagined space where these oppositions dissolve and industrial progress is reimagined through romantic sensitivity rather than

destructive force.

These industrial landscapes extend into the gallery space through new sandblasted glass panes, set within wooden frames the artist built himself. Ranging from filigree organic motifs to simple geometrical shapes that coalesce into industrial structures, these sculptural pieces divide the exhibition space while simultaneously connecting it – window and obstruction at once; their transparency allows sight lines to pass through the barriers they establish. Nearby, a discarded and tipped-over fuel canister “spills” glossy colour across the floor. In *Atina* (2026), a cat cut-out of found fabric sits quietly against an aluminium background, while the two plaid dachshunds *Walter* and *Freya* (both 2026) observe the scene from floor level.

Together, these works invite viewers to navigate an artistic universe shaped by material properties and unexpected subjects in equal measure. The imagery explores spaces we rarely perceive as places: peripheral zones where energy production and raw material extraction occur, marginal territories between nature and industry. Like the animals that populate these scenes, the viewer is invited to adopt a non-anthropocentric perspective, watching rather than controlling.

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Robert Elfgen (*1972, Wesseling, Germany) lives and works in Cologne and Brittany, France. From 1997 to 2001, Elfgen studied under John M. Armleder at the Braunschweig University of Art (HBK). Elfgen studied under Rosemarie Trockel at the Kunstakademie Düsseldorf from 2001, becoming her Meisterschüler in 2004. He received a grant from Kölnischer Kunstverein and Imhoff-Stiftung, Cologne (2004), the Förderpreis des Landes NRW für junge Künstlerinnen und Künstler (2007), and the Grafikpreis des Landes NRW (2009). Selected solo exhibitions include *Fuhrwerkswaage*, Cologne (2025), PIBI Gallery, Seoul (2022 with An Gyungsu), Sprüth Magers, Berlin (2021), Leopold-Hoesch-Museum, Düren, Germany (2016), Oldenburger Kunstverein, Oldenburg, Germany (2015), Sprüth Magers, Cologne (2008), *westlondonprojects*, London (2006), and *Bonner Kunstverein*, Bonn (2005). Selected group exhibitions include *Langen Foundation*, Neuss, Germany (2025), *Villa Stuck*, Munich (2017), *me Collectors Room Berlin / Stiftung Olbricht* (2014), *Zentrum für Kunst und Medien*, Karlsruhe, Germany, and *Sammlung Falckenberg*, Hamburg (both 2007–08).

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