

Galería Ehrhardt Flórez

JAN ZÖLLER

The Remaining Smell of the Wunderkerze

From May 9th to July 24th 2026

'I have come to make them extract the philosopher's stone from me'

Antonin Artaud

At Galería Ehrhardt Flórez, Jan Zöllner presents seven large canvases and several works on paper under the title *The Remaining Smell of the Wunderkerze*. As in his recent exhibitions, Zöllner now presents, alongside this group of paintings – which form a wholly new and unprecedented strand in his oeuvre – various pieces of furniture and architectural structures that disrupt the original flow of the exhibition space and draw the viewer towards new forms of contemplation.

Through its title as a suggestive metaphor, and through the pictorial as visual representation, *The Remaining Smell of the Wunderkerze* revives a specific moment in which the senses awaken the memory and presence of a concrete event. Lighting a sparkler (Wunderkerze), sharing that act and painting it, forms the central theme of this exhibition. Sparklers and their depiction – whether lit or unlit, smouldering or sparkling – occupy a large part of the surface of these enormous canvases. These giant, painted sparklers at times appear in isolation, at others in conjunction, igniting one another, their flame, spark or brilliance a form of shared celebration. And this act of celebration is not merely intellectual or metaphorical, but also visual: it is in the manner of painting that much of the artist's current pictorial exploration lies.

Zöllner's painting remains rooted in the origins of the pictorial image, not merely as observation but as projection. There is something intoxicating in some pieces, a unique blending or a certain eclecticism – at times highly modern, insofar as it reflects the spirit of an era; yet in other paintings there is a certain approach to the idea of a melancholic landscape which, far from the vibrancy of other works, presents a somewhat jaded atmosphere, even of anti-heroic tragedy, more contemplative. Whilst very different from one another, at least at first glance, with different compositions, different colour palettes and different pictorial treatments of backgrounds and forms, most of the paintings are constructed from a series of common geometric elements which, far from forming a unified scene, stand as compositional pillars. Whilst in some works it is the coloured circles that fulfil both an architectural and an ornamental function, other paintings are structured around the interplay of cubes or squares which, arranged in a chequerboard pattern or as floating structures, organise the remainder of the canvas. These new works propose a somewhat reductionist shift: the motifs that featured prominently in his earlier paintings, such as bird heads with anthropomorphic bodies, are reduced to striking beaks that appear suddenly in the painting from the sides in the form of triangles; at the same time, the more schematic diagonal lines of the sparklers replace the elements of an earlier, far more narrative-driven painting.

The first room presents visitors with a railing that runs across the room. It is an industrial metal railing, of the sort found on the streets to divide urban areas, to protect certain parts of the city, or to serve as a bicycle rack. Zöllner picked this railing up some time ago, abandoned on the street, and it became an iconic piece at Zentrale, an off-space he ran for years in his hometown of Karlsruhe. Now, for this new exhibition in Madrid, the railing also serves to hold a set of candles which, resting lit upon the metal bars, burn down until they disappear. Next to the railing is a large horizontal painting in which two sparklers appear, criss-crossing one another the moment they are lit, against a black, nocturnal background, against which tree trunks mark the main compositional axes. A work on paper featuring further painted sparklers completes the room. Meanwhile, in the main exhibition space, seats or benches constructed in a completely improvised manner from reused materials occupy the central part of the gallery. Created as a sort of DIY project, they invite visitors to sit and contemplate, reflect or chat in front of those paintings that seem to demand a little more time and attention than a quick glance. And not because they require more attention than any other painting, but because these are four works that are formally and chromatically very different from one another, and which, whilst sharing common pictorial elements, engage in highly distinctive interplays. Whilst some paintings function almost as a kind of landscape, with vast expanses of flat colour that give the picture its meaning, others, far more turbulent, present an enormous diversity of motifs and more vibrant forms. Finally, in the last room we find a painting featuring something like humanoid birds that, articulated or mechanised, like a blend of machine and movement, and which, echoing Marcel Duchamp's *'Nude Descending a Staircase'* (in that radically humanist-futuristic vision proposed by the French artist), walk with their trembling limbs like animated harlequins. Once again, the sparklers illuminate a scene filled with balanced brown cubes and black forms that, like other elements of the exhibition, disrupt any continuous, linear reading.

The architectural structures displayed in the various rooms – which were previously ceilings, walls or openings in the walls, and which now appear to us as seats or furniture – take on, in capitalist society, various almost political connotations in relation to forms of expression in social action, hegemony and dominant thinking in the configuration of urban and domestic structures, or in the use of certain design objects that are omnipresent in the collective imagination. In Zöllner's artistic language, however, they play a diametrically opposite role, with his interventions in space altering in some way our perspective and the more or less logical paths we take, a manifestation and defence of the public sphere, of social encounter, of convergence and community participation.

This new painting has the spirit or vision of something akin to a novel discovery or fascination. A certain feverish atmosphere – a fervour – underpins a discontinuous vision, situated somewhere between clairvoyance and reverie. In the end, his deliberate commitment to painting and his rigorous affinity make Jan Zöllner's new paintings prime examples of a new aesthetic of what Artaud called the '*psychic movement*'.