

CONTEMPORARY FINE ARTS
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"JOHNNY COME HOME II"



Jonathan Meese
"Hat die reitende Leiche...", 2006
Mixed media oil on canvas
240 x 80 cm / 94 1/2 x 31 1/2 in.

Contemporary Fine Arts is pleased to present an exhibition with work by **Jonathan Meese** from the year 2006 – a time where the artist was at a peak of creativity.

Today, one might almost be tempted to think that there is nothing left to say about Jonathan Meese because the output of his artistic career, which started in 1998 at the Berlin Biennale, has been so immense. Since then, countless commentaries and reviews have been written about him, and he has been classified in numerous ways, all of which lend the title of his Biennale work, *Ahoi de Angst*, an almost prophetic quality – as if Meese had known that he would sail accross wide seas.

Ahoi de Angst was a labyrinthine cabinet of curiosities full of the heroes of teenagers through which one strolled like through the convolutions of a total fan's brain; wildly outfitted with posters of Klaus Kinski, Che Guevara, Bill Clinton, or Romy Schneider, in between posters full of scribbled paintings of figures and words, self-portraits and Grim Reapers, dilettantishly annotated with phrases like "Clan of Clan." There was a TV, a mirror ball, a sofa, and a record player. The whole thing was an energetic ensemble of cult and kitsch, sophisticated culture and soft porn, tragedy and comedy – and even then it stood for what Meese remains to this day: an artist who puts his own person at the service of art and thus retreats behind the work.

However, this universal, indeed impersonal standard does not seem obvious at first sight. The virile names with their dark connotations, leitmotifs in his oeuvre, are part of the educated middle-class canon. But Stalin, Hitler, Wagner, Nietzsche, Caligula, Alex de Large, Darth Vader, and Lautréamont, outside of any conceivable context, lead to absurd title inventions thickly painted, collaged, fragmented-figurative pictorial worlds without contours, qualities which are also displayed in the series of portraits exhibited. Rather emptied of meaning, rumbling in an adolescent sound reminiscent of the Knights of the Grail, the works there are called *Im 8. Namen des Erzfisches* [In the 8th Name of the Archfish], *Dein Stahlblindes geortetes Geschlechtsteil riecht* [Your Steelblind Located Genital Smells, or *Die Verdammte im Tiertum* [The Female Damned in the Animaldom]. That the superordinate claim in these image-text productions is not immediately clear to everybody is due to the fact that Meese frequently brings his own face and body, the heroes of his youth, and even his own mother into play, linking himself with the historical figures, even appropriating their traits and playing grotesque masques – crowned by seemingly naïve, ostentatiously repeated provocations like casts of erect penises, Hitler salutes, and darkly smoldering prefixes “Erz” and “Arch.” But what might easily be mistaken as the display of an inner pandemonium has nothing to do with narcissism. Meese is not interested in Meese himself. Rather, with a playful devotion, he evokes the total openness of being through the “dictatorship of art” – beyond the axioms of inflexible rules and ideologies.

“Art has its own laws which we don’t even know. We always try to force our own laws upon art. And it is much more interesting to simply wait and see what it will put in front of us”, Meese said in 2006. And: “I hold the sentimental belief that art is still something powerful, something individual that stems itself against the immense bureaucracy that takes everything over.” Meese sees art as a dimension that is independent of the artist, as a way of thinking and acting that is an alternative to the increasingly rigid everyday regulations. But can art exist independently – beyond a creator who determines its laws?

The crux of Meese’s art – regardless of what medium he works in – is the defence of its myths and archetypes which create a universal world image that goes beyond the individual, including him as an artist. For Meese, the artist must serve art, and thus humanity, and therefore s/he must not pursue any kind of self-expression. This is why in his work figures keep appearing that embody this universality; they are representative characters, lacking detail, whose essence he reveals, rather than telling individual narratives. By transferring this essence into art, Meese is able to play with such stereotypes – also in combination with the self portrait, which is never personal and weighed down with moods, but like all his other figures clichéd, hermetic, and in a mischievous way saturated with myth. “The self-staging of the figure of the artist by Meese has something consciously exemplary, he foregrounds the exemplary character of the artist”, explains Robert Fleck, who attributes the power of his work to its “utopian character”. “Meese presents himself with all his representational energy that characterises him, as the sum of all figures and names from German mythology to Darth Vader”, writes Friedrich Meschede. “In a certain respect, Jonathan Meese is agnostic, somebody, however, who on his path to salvation does not avoid any puddle and clod of soil, and who thus encounters the dark and evil wherever he goes, and takes on its shadows”, writes Veit Loers. And Susanne Titz speaks of a “collapse of time” in Meese’s work, originating from “pure mental work, timelessly unclear, at the same time in many ways offensive, but in a strangely conciliatory way because it reveals something very personal.” So – personal after all?

Yes and no. Meese’s battles of images cannot be generated from a search engine; it emanates from an individual perception repertory. But Meese filters and reduces this until he gets to the core of things – just like Picasso’s women’s portraits and Van Gogh’s self-portraits get their life not from illustration, but from transcending mere ego. Meese sees himself as a “soldier of art” – as somebody who serves a free intellectual and aesthetic space, reveals the possibilities of poetry and lyricism, and in this way holds up social limitations as a mirror to the beholder.