

SPRÜTH MAGERS

Karen Kilimnik
Sprüth Magers, London
April 13 - May 26, 2018

Karen Kilimnik's latest exhibition with Sprüth Magers brings together works from across four decades in her career as one of the most important representatives of figurative painting, sculpture and installation. Included in the exhibition is an early example of her sculptures, as well as early drawings, and more recent paintings and prints in her delightful and darkly humorous style. Kilimnik's diverse practice is recognised for activating relationships between the traditions of culture and art history. Frequently, she combines figures and motifs from art history and collective memory – ballerinas, aristocracy, the Second World War – with cultural references to music, media and film.

Paris is Burning (1991)/ Is Paris Burning?(1944) from 1992 is the first work in the exhibition, occupying the ground floor space. The work has not been shown publicly since Kilimnik's very first museum show at the ICA Philadelphia in 1992. It is an important example of her early sculptural work – a genre for which she gained attention in the late 1980s alongside artists such as Mike Kelley and Cady Noland. Other early examples include The Joker Episode of the Avengers (1991) – part of a series of works based on the British television series The Avengers. In the work on view, an assortment of objects is displayed throughout the exhibition space, seemingly at random, giving the illusion of an abandoned stage set or a display in a store window. On the back wall, the two halves of the work's title are announced in bold white typeface on black posters, simulating the cards used in silent movies as well as the aesthetic in Jennie Livingstone's 1990 documentary, Paris is Burning. At a remove from each other, the titles indicate two narrative frames for the incongruous props and posters that appear around them. On the left, 'Is Paris Burning?' Refers to a Hollywood movie from 1966 that centred on Hitler's real-life plans to destroy Paris in 1944, hours before it was liberated from Nazi rule. Meanwhile on the right, Kilimnik uses the aforementioned documentary that followed the thriving ball culture engendered by New York City's African-American, Latino, gay, and transgender communities. The films collide in the installation: the stigmatic symbol of the swastika brands a red dress like a flag, and is displayed with a bandaged leg, skis, tights, a jacket, and other costume and fashion items. The props appear to be selected from the historic and recent past to overlap in a disconcerting mise en scène of twentieth century experience. On the left, photos are displayed from the Hollywood movie, showing cities ravaged by bombs and battles in the Second World War. On the right, ball vocabulary appears with the names of the most illustrious New York drag 'houses'. Kilimnik uses the idea of the stage set to re-present icons of evil as adornment, fashion and fascism, and to present historical fact as theatre. Through presenting these two discordant areas of history – war-torn Europe and countercultural New York, she examines how cultures are established through varying means.

Kilimnik's theme of the Second World War continues in the next room. Paintings of fighter planes and studies of military horses are treated with a lightness of colour and ease of brushstroke that sometimes transforms their subject matter into décor. Elsewhere, an early series of maps is shown alongside a new, much larger series that at first glance looks like abstract paintings. The Battle for

SPRÜTH MAGERS

France is plotted in one, accompanied by a series of handwritten notes explaining battle plans. In another, she comments on the visual prettiness of the colours and shapes, deliberately subsuming the trauma and devastation they identify into a prettier, more appealing surface. Kilimnik's works are often saturated with these double meanings – innocence and cynicism, fantasy and reality, the everyday and infamy. Elsewhere, a selection of large-scale new photographs display figurines of eighteenth century mounted soldiers. These works reveal Kilimnik's fascination with cultural history, which is explored further in the gallery upstairs. Copies of the work of earlier artists abound, such as Scottish artist Sir Henry Raeburn, as well as French Rococo painter Jean Baptiste Oudry. The early drawing *My Sister and Me* by Sir Thomas Lawrence (1986) is a copy in pastel of a painting by Sir Thomas Lawrence, whilst another early pastel is a copy of a work by the eighteenth century French artist, Jean-Baptiste Greuze. They, along with the later 'Doll' paintings, and photographs, attest to Kilimnik's instrumental development of the new tendency in figurative painting, as well as her continued interest in the components that have formed cultural identity through the ages. In her works, the structuring factors of culture are shown to be myriad and unexpected: from regional borders, to regional dress, landscapes, mythology, witchcraft, stagecraft, the big screen and the small screen.

Karen Kilimnik (born 1955, Philadelphia, USA) studied at the Temple University in her hometown where she lives and works today. Major solo exhibitions include *Le Consortium, Dijon – La Romanée Conti* (2014), Museum of Contemporary Art, Denver (2013), the *Belvedere, Vienna* (2010), the *Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris* (2006), the *Serpentine Gallery, London*, the *Institute of Contemporary Art in Philadelphia*, the *Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago*, the *Museum of Contemporary Art, Miami* and *Le Consortium, Dijon* (all 2007), the *Fondazione Belvilacqua La Masa, Venice* (2005) and the *Irish Museum of Modern Art, Dublin* (2002). Major group exhibitions include *Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh* (2018, forthcoming); *Rubell Family Collection, Miami* (2015); the *Whitney Museum of American Art, New York* (2008), the *Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven*, the *MoMA PS1, New York* (both 2006), the *MoMA, New York* (2005, 2001, 1999), the *Institute of Contemporary Art, London* (1997, 1992), and the *Secession, Vienna* (1994). In 2011 Kilimnik created a stage setting for the ballet *Psyche* at the *Opéra National de Paris*.

For further information and press enquiries, contact Bo Bottomley (bb@spruethmagers.com)

Opening reception: April 12, 6 - 8 pm

Viewing Hours: Tue - Sat, 10 am - 6 pm