

En face – Porträt + Porträt

4. November – 7. Dezember 2023

With works by Jürgen Baumann, Mathias Bothor, Katja Flint, Andreas Fux, Norbert Heuler, Nataly Hocke, Henrik U. Müller, Angelika Platen, Susanne Pomrehn, Gerda Schütte, Jan Sobottka, Ingo Taubhorn, Stefan Thiel and Barbara Vallribera.

When a small gallery dedicates a thematic exhibition to a specific genre, such as portrait photography in this case, it is no coincidence. Some of the gallery artists dedicate their work to portrait photography, such as Stefan Thiel or the guest artists Katja Flint and Andreas Fux, who have already appeared several times. Other gallery artists use the medium of photography as the basis for their actual work, such as Susanne Pomrehn or Nataly Hocke. Henrik U. Müller goes his own way with his 'experimental' photography. Gerda Schütte left classical photography a long time ago, but is still a photographer. Since the advent of the digital camera, she has only worked with the photogram, the original form of photography.

Stefan Thiel always returns to the medium of photography, even if he has made a name for himself internationally with other media such as paper cutting (the basis for this is his own photography!). This is also the case with his recent irritating paintings in the German Landscapes series, which are also based on his photographs. A leaden heaviness settles over the black and white paintings on rough canvas, which abstractly (it's only the landscape!) reflect the atrocities of the Hitler regime.

black facebook with his well-known silhouette cut series of the *100 Berlin Based Men* and the *Erotica* series are also based on (portrait) photography. For the exhibition *en face*, he recently accompanied two young people - brothers - with his camera as they prepared to shape their bodies in the gym to impress the girls, as they say. An astonishing honesty is shown as they struggle and pose in an almost caricature-like manner. One of the brothers is reminiscent of a portrait of the cartoon character Popeye, as he poses awkwardly in front of the mirror. The photography is sensitive, one could even call it tender, and at no point voyeuristic.

Even if **Katja Flint** may not necessarily appear to be a representative of classic portrait photography, but rather works out the essence of human emotions mostly in collaboration with a model, but at the same time depersonalizes this model (which is not exactly the concern of classic portrait photography, i.e. actually the opposite), so that a face or body blurred in motion is created, this can still be formally attributed to portrait photography.

Following her exhibition *Eins* in 2019 at Semjon Contemporary (and previously at the Kunsthalle Rostock, accompanied by the book *eins*, published by Distanz-Verlag), color photographs will be shown for the first time, following her black and white group of works of the *Emotio* pictures.

The new use of color intensifies what had already been distilled in the black and white photography and manages to incorporate a convincing painterly moment into the photograph. The colors correlate with each other in their intensity through a mutual color-complimentary charge. The pigment print perfectly translates this painterly quality of her color photographs. The titles *Holy Man* and *Holy Woman* are irritating, as their faces have a rather diabolical expression. Or are they martyrs with maltreated souls, victims, or even perpetrators?

Haunted is Katja Flint's first full-body photograph to be shown in public. The sitter appears like a ghost with her bare legs crossed in front of her in a white dress. The face, peeling out twice in an upward movement, represents two emotional moments that are disparate to each other, but could represent a sympathetic ghost. The surrounding black and white space around the 'ghost' condenses the image into a tense composition.

Andreas Fux, who for several decades has been capturing the spirit of young people in their chosen, non-mainstream living environment through undisguised, quite violent self-portrayal, but compositionally shaping it with the models, expands the subject through bluntly sexually charged directness. However, the works in this show are more discreet, with a focus on early works created in Berlin-Mitte before the fall of the Wall, but they already give a preview of what is to come (cf. his last solo exhibition *Innocence* in summer 2022, which brought together some motifs on the occasion of the photo book of the same name, published by Salzgeber Verlage, Berlin). A young man with a naked upper body on a bridge connecting houses stands in contrast to the architecture of a seemingly picturesque GDR tristesse, battered by time and the scarcity of resources (although this also existed in West Berlin – as a Kreuzberg, Neukölln and Wedding variant). The bright, shapely torso and the white trousers and cloth shoes against the crumbling plaster could be read as hopeful signs: One year after the photo session, the Wall came down. The architecture and bridge that have mutated into a backdrop in this photo no longer exist. The rear building has been demolished and a new building has stood there since reunification. The historic WMF building on Leipziger Strasse, on the other hand, was one of the first buildings in Mitte to be extensively restored. It also gave the name of the photograph: *WMF*

Wandertag mit Ralf I from 1985 shows a person walking alone on Eichendorffstraße towards Torstraße, not far from where Semjon Contemporary is located. A young man has his back turned to the viewer and is alone in a wide open space. This type is well known in the history of photography. A few cars, and above all numerous construction trailers, lining the right-hand side of the street bear witness to the fact that Berlin-Mitte was already considered to be in need of redevelopment at the time, and therefore had a promising future.

Indian Boy from 1991 shows a young naked man, conscious of himself, sitting on a beautiful Indian motorcycle below the Brücke der Einheit (today: Glienicker Brücke). A towel wrapped around his neck also covers his sex. Two passers-by dressed on Sundays look down with interest as he walks.

Jonas von 2021 forms a discreet link to Andreas Fux's oeuvre, not shown here, which, in its directness of self-confident self-presentation and display of the body, made him a big name in the gay community, but also helped to secure his place in the world of photography. Turned in on himself, with his eyes closed, Jonas invites us as viewers to explore his beautiful washboard stomach framed by a body, but also his sensitive face.

Excerpts from these groups of works by the aforementioned 'permanent' guest artists are bracketed by the deliberate addition of portrait photographs by other artists from outside the gallery.

Angela Platen has been portraying artists since the late 1960s (Courtesy by Galerie Michael Haas) and presents, for example, a captivating, even tender portrait from 1972 of the young Georg Baselitz (*Georg Baselitz - Waldmeister*). The author of these lines was touched by this picture when he was viewing it for the selection of motifs at Platen's studio, as he only knew the artist Georg Baselitz as the master and professor who had long since acquired a natural authority that radiated internationally. In this photo, the artist is at the beginning of his career. Quasi opposite him (on the other half of the red wall by the passage from Schaulager to the Garden Salon) is a portrait of the equally very young Gerhard Richter from 1971, who is photographing himself in a mirror. Thus, two of the most important German artistic personalities, who went their own way early on and are among today's artist stars, are assembled on the red wall.

The portrait of Blinky Palermo, who installed a mural in Hamburg at the same time in 1972, and during the photography session commissioned by Angelika Platen captured her in a photograph balancing on a ladder in front of his work (it was used as the motif for the

invitation card), also represents a beautiful duo. It has become an iconic Platen image. Her positive energy, her joie de vivre, but also her determination can be seen in this captivating picture, which radiates a cheeky and subtle eroticism. Anyone who encounters the artist today, a good 50 years later, still succumbs to her charm and confident directness.

Mathias Bothor, neighbor of the gallery on Schröderstraße in Mitte, is showing an expressive portrait from 2006 of the recently deceased Nobel Prize winner for literature, Kenzaburō Ōe. Gathered within himself with closed eyes and black, dominant glasses (reminiscent of Corbusier glasses), only the two upper thirds of his face can be seen at the bottom right of the picture in front of a black background that takes up almost as much space as the picture format. Absolute concentration and contemplation, cheekily contrasted by an unruly swirl of hair that winds its way into the dark space like a luminous drawing. *closedeyebow*, a large-format black and white picture, showing only the face of a boy with closed eyes, forms the eye-catcher in the main room of the gallery. Well proportioned, his long, thick eyelashes magically attract our gaze. It radiates contemplation and stillness, but also curiosity and the future. Is it because we are now reflecting on childhood itself, represented by this boy, knowing full well what struggles, joys and disappointments lie ahead for him?

Works from 1975 to 2004 by **Norbert Heuler**, also like Andreas Fux, a well-known photographer in Berlin's gay community, who incidentally provided the motif for the first official AIDS poster in the 1980s, are on display. Self-portraits as a young naked man from 1975 and from 2004, covering his entire face with an intensely blue Tuareg cloth, can be seen. Further photographs taken in collaboration with some of his (Berlin) models complement the excerpted body of work on display. His photo book *Männer aus Berlin* from 1991 (published by Bruno Gmündner) is on display in the triangular book tower, which houses several photo books and catalogs on the exhibiting artists in the main room. The book *im tanz mit mir selbst*, produced this year, is also on display. *Peter* (outside the exhibition, but available in the reserve) looks at you in a kneeling position, curious, friendly and awake in the eyes, clearly showing his proud privates. Innocence and Eros...

Jan Sobottka, who has been known in the Berlin art scene for decades because he continuously takes portraits of artists at vernissages, is represented with six examples. A tableau consisting of photographs by Ursula Sax (the grande dame of sculpture, represented by Semjon Contemporary), Tabea Blumenschein, Nan Goldin and Eva & Adele

is complemented by a hanging constellation of two with a portrait of the English art critic Mark Gisbourne, who lives in Berlin, and an early portrait of the painter and sculptor Jonas Burgert. All the portraits are characterized by an in-situ spontaneity that Sobottka naturally finds during his many visits to vernissages and galleries. Precise and friendly in his conversation with the protagonists, he knows how to direct them directly and, for example, to determine the direction of their gaze and the position of their heads. There is often a slight under-view, which emphasizes the spontaneity, as if in a moment of encounter, but already on the verge of another conversation and pictorial motif. This applies to both the people portrayed and the photographer.

Interesting in this context is the fact that three of the exhibiting photographers alone have taken portraits of Ursula Sax (Angelika Platen and Mathias Bothor). Each photograph has its own character and naturally reflects not only the self-portrayal of the artist, but also the eye and intention of the photographing artists.

Ingo Taubhorn could also be defined as a classic portrait photographer, but this approach is extended with the inclusion of a conceptual-artistic level. The well-known and diverse work series *Die Kleider meiner Mutter* (*My Mother's Clothes*) is present with four examples, as well as an example from the series *Hand in Hand*, which he has been working on continuously for four decades with his then friend and now husband Roland Poppensieker. The authorship in the image reference *Roland Poppensieker and Ingo Taubhorn* also reinforces this conceptual approach.

On the one hand, a queer approach is intertwined early on in his photographic art, while at the same time he holds a mirror up to us, as the travesties of his actions of everyday 'housewife activities', recreated while cleaning the house, vacuuming, sitting under the hairdresser's drying hood, expose the stuffiness and the distribution of roles within a classic heteronormative marriage (household), as a symbol of a family image in which most of us viewers are likely to have grown up. The furnishings and the style of dress speak a clear language and place the time from the 1950s upwards to the most recent times, even though much of the protagonists' appearance may have remained the same. The equally well-known series of works *Hand in Hand* is represented by an example from 1993. Part of the concept is that another person may/must press the shutter release of the camera, because the frozen performative act of two men holding hands, no matter where in the world, requires assistance, especially when the protagonists are photographed at a great distance,

as in the example shown: they are depicted as precisely drawn silhouette lines and merge with the Tunisian desert landscape. *Hand in hand - El Faouar*, coming along very discreetly.

The photographer invited to this exhibition, **Jürgen Baumann**, shows a triptych of 98 portraits of open boys' mouths, ecstatically distorted while singing, and also represents the field of conceptual photography. The powerful-voiced work *Die Regensburger Domspatzen* from 2013 visibly condenses the conceptual claim here, as the open mouths of the famous choirboys are each individual, but due to their multiplicity they nevertheless arrange themselves into an entire, polyphonic concert in a triptych. The individual in the serial has been established as a formal theme in the art world since Andy Warhol at the latest. Recent political and social developments in Germany, but also worldwide, have given this work a political charge. The abuse scandals in the Catholic Church, but also the me-too debate since 2017, provide eloquent testimony.

It is no coincidence that Jürgen Baumann's work was awarded 1st prize in category 3: Photography and Media by the Düsseldorf Aufklärungsdienst last year out of over 1000 entries.

Susanne Pomrehn's dissecting photocuts are more experimental and cannot necessarily be subsumed under the subject 'portrait' at first glance. Her large landscape-format face, called *Split* from 2007, is based on a portrait photograph, which she cuts away and recomposes to create a very abstract facial landscape. Only the eyes, the lower edge of the nose and the shadow of the mouth refer to the pictorial subject of a portrait photograph. A few years ago, the artist used personal album photographs of the text author and created the series *Multilayered*, which distils an essence from the private photographs. By cutting out and cutting away and creating new pictorial spaces by folding over individual sections that meander between the white void and the actual, Pomrehn creates her own pictorial interpretations that can be quite contrary to the original pictorial statement. An invitation for anyone interested to order highly individual and special commissioned works from the artist from his/her own life, collected in photo albums (or digitally in the cloud).

Barbara Vallibera photographs faces classically with a model, but adds other materials during the photographic process, which sometimes alienate the face, e.g. by covering it with a net. Further techniques are applied in the darkroom, such as solarization, resulting in very unique, expressive, small-format facial landscapes that depict the maltreated state and vulnerability of human beings. Even though all the works are presented in an edition, they

are not simply a print from the negative, but each one is unique. The laboratory work involved in the production of a picture is always individual, and naturally there are differences between the same motifs. Hung in the Garden Salon as a block of four (all created in the 1990s), they correspond perfectly with the small black and white photograph (*Flake*) by Katja Flint, which is discreetly positioned next to *Haunted* on the angled pillar wall facing Vallribera's works.

The graphic reduction of image-defining details, such as nets placed over the face or the wrapping of the head with foil in the photographic process, is complemented by Vallribera's individual post-processing in the darkroom. The motif is graphically abstracted, formed into a sign, and yet has differentiated inner tones in the baryta paper through solarization and other techniques.

The author of these lines still remembers an almost three-meter-long, self-exposed and developed baryta print with a full-body motif against a dark background very well.

Nataly Hocke is a sculptor, draughtswoman, painter and photographer and combines these genres in her body of work to form a whole. The works on display use the photographs she has taken as a starting point and give them an additional meaning beyond photography. One could also say that photography is expanded. Chains of associations are created and stories are told that have neither a beginning nor an end, but are 'knitted' in our minds. The installation of the photograph (mostly gelatin silver prints) in found frames, cases or cigar boxes, the photograph of a painterly reworked photograph (here as an edition) testify to its strong poetic-associative power and create enchanting artifacts that reflect our human and artistic existence and enchant us at the same time.

In this way, each of the artist's photographs is surrounded by a special aura of uniqueness and, if necessary, the photograph is transformed into sculpture with other image-defining details.

Over the years, **Henrik U. Müller** has developed his own technique of reconciling photography with painting and combining the two to create compositional elements that define the image. A material, but also content-related 'carrier' can be attributed to the composite gold leaf. As in medieval icon painting, gold is the representative of the divine, the infinite, the intangible and is ascribed a bridging function, a moment of transcendence. The situation is similar with Müller, even if today, as Westernized societies, we no longer accept religion - as a work of man - as the all-consuming and brutally ruling 'reign of God'. The longing to transcend, on the other hand, has remained, and gold as a color and

material still holds this power. When Henrik U. Müller underlays the faces and busts of the young Maasai he photographed in Africa a few years ago with gold and places them on a neutral, warm ivory-colored lacquer background, a moment of transcendence takes place, from a Maasai 'robbed' of his context to a representative of himself, as already indicated in the title: "Joseph" and "Kimya", as individuals, not 'only' as representatives of the Maasai people.

Another aspect comes into play that the author has only recently discovered: While moving in space, the image changes in a fascinating way: Depending on the angle of the light, the gold-backed head changes like a picture puzzle, as we know it from historical daguerreotypes. There, the highly polished silver on a copper plate is the image carrier. In Müller's work, it is the gold background on which the photograph is superimposed. If the motif is in shadow, it becomes precise and naturalistic. If, on the other hand, the light falls directly on it, the gold ground becomes dominant and the 'drawing' of the photograph is reduced.

The fact that a single pictorial work consists of a large number of panels also makes the work of Henrik U. Müller's work unmistakable. It further enlivens and animates the pictorial motif, citing the essence of the imperfect and the intermediate state. *Panta rhei*.

Gerda Schütte is represented in the exhibition with only two works. Her first ever artistic photograph, from 1989, is part of the exhibition.

Originally, the artist wanted to realize a land art project, but the tide that was supposed to fill the stone circle she had built on an uninhabited island off Guernsey in the English Channel with water did not occur as expected because there was a new moon and therefore no tide. Without further ado, Gerda Schütte placed herself in the stone circle, stylized herself into a flower and let the self-timer take the picture. The originally unintentional darkness of her own body shape was welcome, however, as it automatically abstracted her body silhouette into a (vegetal) symbol. In retrospect, this photograph (she titled it *Selbstportrait*) can also be read as an indicator of where her artistic work would lead: To abstract photography (cf. her book *Fotografie!*, published by Semjon Contemporary in 2017 and published by Kehrer-Verlag). At that time, she was still working in analog. Years later, when the digital camera became marketable, she put the analog camera aside and concentrated on the origins of photography, the photogram. One example of a beautiful, very individual work is on display. *Souvenirs d'Afrique* could also be a mask. It could therefore thematize the presence of a person despite the absence of a face. Certainly a daring interpretation, but the exhibition title has already provided for this in its double

portrait + portrait, giving the exhibition organizer the greatest possible curatorial freedom. Gerda Schütte thus forms a bracket within the exhibition: from the self-portrait from 1989 (it corresponds perfectly with the picture by Roland Poppensieker and Ingo Taubhorn *Hand in Hand - El Faouar*, which was taken in 1993 in Tunisia in the vastness of the desert) to the highly experimental and conceptual work *Souvernirs d'Afrique* created in 2017.

The joy of juxtaposing these different positions in the thoroughly free reference system of portrait photography also seems to touch visitors to the exhibition. That is how it should be. When visions become reality!

Semjon H. N. Semjon,
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