

En face – Porträt + Porträt II **(Painting. Drawing. Sculpture.)**

With works by Olaf Hajek, Renate Hampke, MK Kaehne, Harald Kohlmetz, Henrik U. Müller, Ursula Sax, Gil Shachar, Stefan Thiel and Mia Witte

April 26 – May 25, 2024

Opening: Thursday April 25, 7 – 9.30 pm

Following the first part of the exhibition series "en face – Portrait + Portrait" from autumn 2023, which dealt with the artistic medium of photography in excerpts, there is now a further focus on the media of painting, drawing and sculpture.

Portrait painting, which was part of the canon of painting for centuries, has clearly faced strong competition from photography, at the latest since post-war modernism. It has never died out and has produced outstanding representatives, but it has become one subject among many. L'art pour l'art, the purposelessness of art and its self-reference have also contributed to this.

How can the image of the human being be represented in contemporary art today, when we have long since been visually overwhelmed by images of images, sculptures and people in digital social media and AI is also making inroads?

The second part of this exhibition series focuses on painting (Kohlmetz, Müller, Thiel and Witte) as well as drawing (Shachar, Kaehne) and sculpture (Hampke, Kaehne, Shachar, Sax), which, as in Part I, only shed light on this genre in part.

It is all the more impressive when we encounter outstanding works of painting and sculpture, either from current studio production or from years gone by, especially when these works have to compete with the works of art known to us from such a rich and long history.

The selection is of course a subjective one and clearly has to do with resources. They are either works by gallery artists (Hampke, Kohlmetz, Müller, Sax, Shachar and Thiel) or guest artists with whom we have been working for some time (MK Kaehne, Olaf Hajek) or who have recently joined us (Mia Witte).

Harald Kohlmetz developed his type of bust painting back in the 1990s, while still studying art under Karlheinz Erfurt at the Hochschule der Künste zu Berlin, now the Universität der Künste. The latest paintings presented here are from 2015.

The author of these lines experienced the creation of this group of works at first hand, as he was also a student of fine arts and met Harald Kohlmetz on a daily basis; both had studios on the same floor of the HdK in Grunewaldstraße, albeit in different classes.

Many conversations have taken place about his new paintings, and the author's opinion of the quality and uniqueness of this series of works has not changed, on the contrary. It has become permanent. Particularly in today's noisy and long since digitalized world of image glut and its ever faster pace, these quiet but powerful paintings are their opposite and invite contemplation and self-assurance, should one not have fundamental difficulties in resting within oneself. Because then – and this has often happened again and again in reception, in personal encounters over the years – the viewer's gaze quickly turns away, because he is being looked at directly by the eyes of the bust portrait. The object becomes the subject. The only way to escape the gaze is to physically distance oneself. He or she moves on or reacts with a lack of understanding and a verbal attack. "What's that supposed to mean?" or "The painting is creepy to me", etc. When you consider that the bald men depicted are all a construct of the artist, and not a classic portrait created in situ with a model or painted from a photograph, and then realize that this all had its origins before the digital era, and that the painted personalities are not Photoshop compilations or even the product of AI, then it becomes clear that the artist is concerned with abstracting the classic genre of portraiture and searching for the representative who tries to boil down the essence of being human to a s i n g l e i m a g e . There should be no distraction, no hairstyle to detract from the person's face: that is why the people portrayed are all men; Kohlmetz finds it too degrading to deprive women of their hair – men without hair, on the other hand, are familiar to us. The abstract white surrounding space promotes concentration on the face, formulates an abstract stage that manifests the spiritual, but also the placelessness and timelessness, and integrates it into the materialized construct of a conceptual painting that seeks to understand the essence of man. Who are you, who am I?

Gil Shachar, on the other hand, invites us to take a closer look at his sculptural work, the casts of real people whose heads and shoulders have now become bust sculptures in wax. The viewer's shame or insecurity is diminished by the closed eyes of the portrait sculpture. The work remains an object. An object with personality, just like the model sitters, here too mostly men, because for most women, getting rid of their hair for the plaster cast is an all too understandable obstacle (an exception is "Birgit" from 2001, not shown here, however).

"Salomon", the young South African, was recently cast in Johannesburg when Gil Shachar exhibited there. Stoically resting in himself, as is common to all of the artist's bust or head sculptures, he invites us to approach him, as the closed eyes allow us to approach the wax sculpture of the young man without hesitation. The positioning in the exhibition below the height of the viewer's eye allows us to perceive him from slightly above and intensifies the moment of active looking. We have to bend down a little to explore the details of the face. At the same time, the vulnerability of the person portrayed becomes abundantly clear; we can approach him as we please,

something we would not do in an encounter with the living Solomon. And we discover the balanced proportions, his beauty and can observe in detail the plasticity of the sensual lips, the well-formed nose and the tender little ears. Gil Shachar generally paints the short hair, eyebrows and eyelashes on the waxen head with oil paint, so that the wafer-thin application creates a vividly painted color bar that is able to translate the volume, the liveliness of even very short hair trimmed to 1 mm in length in a painterly and sculptural way. This can be seen very clearly in the second bust sculpture in the exhibition, "David". With "Salomon", on the other hand, the approach is different. The short-cropped hair of Africans is not straight-stranded like that of whites, but curls and frizzes right at the scalp. The artist translates this by carving small circular shapes, which are filled with oil paint using a wafer-thin paintbrush. The result is a sculptural relief, just as it exists in nature. Gil Shachar recently sculpted David for the second time. The first time was 23 years ago, when he was still a young man. The facial features have become more striking. Resting in himself, with his eyes closed, he could open them at any moment. That is how realistic the portrait is. The inward gaze goes outwards into the world. It is our projection and leaves us alone with ourselves. With or without knowledge.

The second group of works by Gil Shachar shown in the exhibition are his "shadow pictures". They are sculptures and drawings at the same time. Impressions of paper, including torn or ripped paper, transferred to the new reality in epoxy resin. They are primed in monochrome white and worked on with a graphite pencil by dotting, a lengthy process that is like a meditation for the artist (the same applies to the hair that is painted onto the sculptures). The results are striking: the extremely even application of graphite depicts the silhouette of a person, usually from the front, and correlates with the traced background in a peculiar way. Either the paper is torn off on one side, and it appears that the drawing has been 'destroyed' afterwards, or the sheet opens up in the middle by being torn open, emphasizing its sculptural nature and at the same time inviting interpretation, as the tears also relate metaphorically and in reality to the portrait of the person. Injury and violence seem to be the obvious themes. A new, recently begun series of "shadow pictures" deals with the blurring of contours, practising their abolition, so to speak. However, the horizontal erasure of the previously black background (with precise contours) creates a network of shadow and light lines that provide only a vague image of the person portrayed. It is evident that a person is meant. A hint of the person's essence remains. Gil Shachar recently 'took' a shadow drawing and a cast of the head from the author of these lines when he collected his latest works from his studio in Duisburg. He did not want to reveal what he intends to do with the latter. The shadow image, on the other hand, is already finished and realized in the same technique. Only the profile of the back of the head and neck, which still shines through despite the etchings, may reveal the sitter to viewers who know him. The facial details, on the other hand, are dissolved by the fluid and energetic structural network.

MK Kaehne, the second sculptor in the exhibition, takes a completely different approach. His multifaceted conceptual work is thematically integrated into cycles. The "Mother" cycle, for example, brings together various techniques and media to approach the theme in different ways and form a whole that complements each other and is charged with abstract narrative. The impression of people is only one part of the whole. Trained as a painter in Moscow and Berlin, the artist is able to give the removed form a fleshy, skin-like incarnation by painting it with oil paint, enlivened by partial, delicate redness and veins. The insertion of glass eyes and the addition of human hair to the relevant parts of the head heighten the realism. You can 'hear' the naked lady in bed (shown exactly one year ago in the exhibition "Mother" in the gallery, not part of the exhibition "en face") and the boy 'breathing'. However, when the boy is dressed as a bust sculpture with a white sweater embroidered with the slogan "My Mother was a Friend of an Enemy of the People" at chest height and the whole thing is presented to us in an elaborately realized design showcase, the image of the boy or the naked woman is part of a whole that belongs together and should be understood as such. Individuality versus commercialization could be the major themes. The illuminated lettering in the Schaulager, also in a signature showcase in reddish-brown wood with an acrylic cover, opens up the view once again. "Paranoia. That is my business." The high level of craftsmanship in all his media (including the show cases) can also be seen in the ink drawing "14:31". Two people are accurately captured on paper in a fleeting moment in a forest clearing or forest path flooded with light. It's hard to cheat with ink drawings. Every brushstroke must be perfect. And they do, presenting a snapshot that is full of energy. The boy spinning in a circle close to the ground and the young man (not unlike the artist), slightly turned away, gazing into the distance. Was this situation captured on a walk in the woods at 2:31 p.m. on any given day?

Stefan Thiel, known in particular for his impressive paper cuts, which depict the rustling of branches, the whispering of water and the sagging of a soft leather handbag in a vivid and lifelike, almost breathing way, has turned to another artistic genre, oil painting, in parallel to this group of works since 2016 and developed it into his own visual language. His last solo exhibition "German Landscapes" in spring 2023 is still very present. The leaden heaviness that settles over the beautiful landscapes that seem innocent to us bears witness to the unimaginable that took place there during the Nazi era. The reduction to black and white oil paint and their mixtures on the greenish-brown canvas reinforce this leaden filter.

He has remained true to the two (non-)colors, even in his portrait paintings. It may also be understood as a discreet reference to his photography, which is the basis for all his groups of works and at the same time plays a continuous role as a medium in its own right.

In the large painting "Dan and Marx", a handsome bearded man, facing us almost en face and looking us confidently in the eye in a black loden coat, is confronted with a

statement by Karl Marx painted in red letters. "All governments, no matter how independent, are only executors of the economic necessities of the national situation." Even if the picture is from 2017, it illustrates the reality, as we have recently experienced with Putin's war, that an economy minister from the Green Party (sic!) is making a deal with anti-democratic Saudi Arabia to help secure energy reserves for his country in the absence of Russian gas, which has been boycotted. As with the "German Landscapes", Stefan Thiel also delivers a message that is irritating and, in this case, also subtly (because it cannot be pinned down) confrontationally portrays the young, self-confident man as someone who is thoroughly dependent on the reality of the world.

The other two portraits are pure portraits, without a painted statement. "Florian", fresh from the studio, and "Roy" from last year are portrait paintings that do not deny their origins in photography, i.e. they were not created with the subject of the portrait as a model in front of the easel. Here, too, the restriction to black and white and their blending can be understood as a reference to photography. If one accepts this, then the next message could be: Painting comes after photography (at least in the more realistic genres such as portrait and landscape painting). Certainly a highly controversial message or interpretation by the author.

Mia Witte, the youngest of the exhibiting artists (born in 2000), is self-taught and is represented with small-format acrylic paintings on painting boards (40 x 30 cm each). She comes from an artistic family in Berlin and started painting at an early age. Mia Witte knows how to place the person to be portrayed in an exciting relationship to the monochrome pictorial space and how to correlate the sizes in a considered way. The result is an intimate casualness, with the head itself taking up only about a third of the pictorial space, which is a self-confident artistic assertion. Two types of painterly approach to the person to be portrayed, or rather two different approaches, are evident. One is the modulation of the facial volume through color in soft transitions, as in "Juliana", for example, and the other is the breaking up of the facial details into softly modulated color fields, which, although slightly softened by transition zones, appear to collide hard and almost abruptly and formulate the depths (shadows) of the anatomical facial modulation. The plastic modulation of the face here is more striking and must be precisely placed in terms of coherence, which the artist demonstrates excellently in "Emma". The slightly melancholy gaze of this young woman is reinforced by the integration of the facial color into an aubergine-colored background, which is itself of painterly delicacy through its differentiation, as it culminates in a strong haptic appeal in the other portrait paintings, especially in "Juliana", because the color there is applied impasto and relief-like, here even spatulated on. Mia Witte knows how to highlight the local facial colors and those of the hair with a contrasting background color, sometimes in a gray-green (as in "Juliana") or turquoise blue (as in "Francesco"), sometimes in eggplant or a light green or in rosé (as the former in "William", and the latter in "Lean" - both paintings are not part of the exhibition, but are represented in

the portfolio).

The curly, untamed hairstyle of "Juliana" emerges precisely from the impasto background with the individual strands of hair. It is another moment that creates its very own pictorial tension. The monochrome background, dominant due to its image-defining size, entices the viewer to approach the picture through the color attraction. The background dissolves into various internal colors and gives the sitter a painterly stage. The surrounding space suggests an unexpected depth and is flat at the same time, directing the viewer like a funnel to the actual subject, the portrait - here of friends - who seem to have been casually placed in the picture, but testify to a great respect and tenderness towards them. These are pictures that touch us with an indefinable intimacy. The manifold positive reactions, especially from fellow artists, confirm the quality independent of each other and that which is characteristic of Witte's painting, its soulful power.

Ursula Sax, the grande dame of sculpture (born in 1935), is represented with a work from the early 1990s. The selected work may serve as a representative of her oeuvre, even though most visitors to the exhibition are unlikely to be familiar with this group of works. In addition to her large-format ink drawings and paper relief works, the work phase of this period is characterized by her preoccupation with clay (terracotta) and, in addition, with papier-mâché. The approach is similar, except that the clay is fired and the paper material is glued to ensure durability. The artist builds the forms by pressing small, flattened lumps of clay or, in this case, paper saturated with glue.

Throughout her life, Ursula Sax has been interested in the geometry of the human body. The well-known dance sculpture ensemble for her "Geometric Ballet" bears eloquent witness to this. The work presented here allows us to look into the (geometric) architecture of a body. We are immediately aware that a human being is depicted here symbolically, as the body is closed off at the top by the neck and head, and a pair of legs of unequal length grows out of the torso-like central body, which is open so that the ribcage (or the arms crossed over it, or both together) and the pelvis form the boundary to the space surrounding us.

A vertically running round bar is highlighted at the center back of the open body and suggests the spine. The opening of the body, which in its metaphorical sense is certainly not a simple fact, is reduced by the all-over of the partially legible, torn paper from daily and advertising newspapers. The numerous printed color details also refer to the latter. The artist has applied very sparing gentian blue paint in a pointed manner that contrasts with the yellowed newsprint. It is presumably not a subsequent painting of the wall sculpture, but rather evidence of other artistic activities: Left overs of newspaper to protect the work table and have now been given a new life with the splashes of color in the papier-mâché.

The seemingly archaic form could be a representative of man, and may therefore be a parable for him in terms of content, and has therefore found its way into the exhibition "en face – portrait + portrait", even if, as one might expect from the exhibition title, it

is not a portrait of an individual personality. The deliberately placed + sign in the exhibition's title allows curatorial freedom without being arbitrary.

The exhibited work "Afrikana" by Renate **Hampke**, who is the same age, presents a similar situation, only more radical because it is more abstract in its interpretation. Implied in the title, it refers to the term that comes from the art market and encompasses all artifacts from sculptures to pottery or textiles that were created in Africa – at whatever time – by the peoples there.

Renate Hampke is very strongly influenced by Arte Povera and creates her work mostly from found materials, which in their new combination exhibit surreal moments through to erotic-abstract charges. The bicycle luggage rack with mudguard and a tuft of cable tie remnants flanking the sides, inserted where the axle of the bicycle normally supports the construction, immediately suggests the image of a (bearded) mask. Just as in Part I of the exhibition series, the photogram of a mask-like structure by Gerda Schütte represents curatorial freedom, the same approach has been taken here: The absence of the human being is thematized, the mask is now the self-representing artefact of a ritual in which the human being has previously formed a unity with the mask, usually accompanied by expressive dances. Hampke's artwork thus draws a similar arc to Schütte's on the theme of the mask as a representative of the human being.

Another work by Renate Hampke, not shown here in the exhibition for reasons of space, but listed in the portfolio, can be understood as a portrait – in this case of Lara Croft – due to its title, even if it is not a veristic depiction of this super-feminine animated art figure. However, it symbolically embodies what characterizes this figure in addition to her beautiful face: the busty, energetic superwoman. The two small balloons alone, held in a kind of clamp made of bicycle inner tubes artfully tied at certain points with cable ties, humorously provide the connotation of the super-feminine being. The red plastic cap of a ballpoint pen, placed on the valve, also describes the attributively feminine (lipstick, painted fingernails) with a wink. A waist is also 'abstractly' suggested. The constricting cable ties protrude aggressively into the room. A further reference to the opposite pole of the superman, the defensive superwoman. Renate Hampke's work can actually be said to have an imaginative and playful approach to the creative process throughout.

The works of **Olaf Hajek**, who presents three framed paintings on paper (more precisely, mixed techniques with watercolor, partially with graphite and varnish) in the exhibition, could be seen as a painterly counterpart to this.

The fireworks of detailed, additive ingredients in his head paintings form an unmistakable whole. The result is a construct of manifold plants and blossoms, which in "Flowerhead" adorn the androgynous-looking face, albeit marked as a man with a fine moustache. Here the headdress is assigned to a man, as in all three pictures in the

current and ongoing series, which focus on the metaphorically multifaceted figure of the dandy. In "Flowerdandy", a full-body figure is shown, recognizable only by his head with long hair, his right hand stretched upwards and his spread legs clad in blue trousers, his feet in elegant red pumps. Otherwise, the expansive clothing made of a sea of flowers and leaves covers the body and is mounted as a collage on a white cardboard support, to which further collaged flowers have been partially added. Together they create an airiness in comparison to the other two works, which appear rather heavy and earthy.

The reversal of facts such as the attribution of the flower and the vegetal to the man (instead of to the woman as previously practiced by Hajek or generally in the history of art), heightened by the androgynous face and the attribution of elegant red pumps, (over)portrays the dandy as a bizarre and excessive figure who embodies a clear touch of the queer. He is very much a child of our time.

Henrik U. Müller, who was already present with works at "en face I" (Stefan Thiel was also there with his photographs), is represented in this exhibition with an early work. "Schöneberger Trias (Frank, Semjon and Adelheid)" was created using a technique developed by the artist that is somewhere between photography and painting, even though this early work does not yet use reverse foil painting (which would otherwise give the group of works the characteristics of a painting). The lacquer is replaced by the translucent (painterly) surface of the individual birch plywood panels, some of which also reveal their grain or knotholes.

Henrik U. Müller has developed his own visual language with his panel work, which is based on photography. This is combined with composition gold, a striking metal – similar to gold leaf, but without any real gold – which is applied to the photographic print transferred to a foil (or also to lacquer paint) and also outlines the photographic details. The individual panels that bind the entire panel work into a whole – often understood as (ceramic) tiles by viewers and described as such – are also an independent creation of the artist and, due to their non-exact application on a common support ground, create an animated relief character of the work, which generates additional tension, as individual panels tilt slightly, do not lie completely flat and occasionally form small gaps to the next panel.

This group of works has become particularly well known for its cherry blossom or tulip motifs, which 'rework' the vanitas motif in a variety of artistic ways and create an Asian impression through the motifs, but also through the powerful yet calm stillness that invites meditation.

The triple portrait of his friends shown here is from an early work phase from 2009 and is a private loan. The protagonists are cleverly placed in the picture diagonal running from top left to bottom right and the author of these lines embraces the other two people with his arms and hands and finds support in the responding hands of the other two. It is a portrait of three friends that thematizes a great closeness and intimate familiarity. 15 years later, this intimacy has naturally even grown.

The portrait exhibition thus imagines different approaches to the term 'portrait'. Shachar, Thiel, Kähne and Witte refer to the likeness of an individual or, in Müller's case, a group of friends; Kohlmetz and Hajek refer to fictions, whereby the purely depictive in Thiel's painting "Dan and Marx" and in Kaehne's "My Mother was a..." opens up a further fictional space, the embedding of and reference to other contexts through the painted (in Thiel's case) or embroidered sayings on the boy's white sweater in Kaehne's case. We know, however, that the supposedly depictive is also a fiction, 'superficially' materialized as an image of a real person, but already decoupled from the real through its realization.

A small web of sculptures, paintings and drawings by various artists is thus spun into a small but fine exhibition on 'portraits', which is flanked by two works of art by the gallery's two oldest artists, who formulate an abstract essence of the underlying theme in their respective artistic expression and thus form a bracket.

Semjon H. N. Semjon, May 2024