

COMPOSITE REALITIES

Combining disparate time frames and painting styles, Berlin-based Amelie von Wulffen renders simple scenes as complex states of mind.

by Kirsty Bell

Amelie von Wulffen: Untitled, 2016, oil on hardboard, 36¼ by 48½ inches.

All images courtesy Galerie Barbara Weiss, Berlin.

THE FLOOR-TO-CEILING windows of Amelie von Wulffen's Berlin studio look onto a wild, overgrown back garden, dotted with flower beds, where the ruins of a brick wall brim with nasturtiums. It doesn't feel like Berlin in this quiet, disheveled, countrylike location in the northeastern district of Weissensee, where von Wulffen moved three years ago to occupy a purpose-built house and studio. Nor, inside the structure, does it feel like summer 2017; it could be any time at all. There are several rolling trolleys loaded with paints, brushes, and wiping rags, and the floor is strewn with books—mostly catalogues of historical painters, from Masaccio to Arcimboldo to Goya—as well as color copies of individual paintings. Propped up on a large easel is a painting by von Wulffen in which a pastel-toned vase of flowers in the foreground stands in explicit contrast to the impressionistic view through the window behind.

At least ten more paintings in various sizes and stages of completion lean against the walls or lie on the floor, some on canvases, others on wood. Sometimes sections of imagery are clearly recognizable from one of the open books or loose sheets on the floor, copied straight and conjoined with other fragments on the painting's surface. These works are all packed into the back half of the studio, where the glass doors lead into the garden and skylights in the double-height ceiling offer a diffused, even light. The front end of the room, facing the street beyond another garden full of brick ruins overgrown with creepers, looks somewhat neglected. This is where she makes drawings, von Wulffen tells me, pointing to a table, its surface covered with more books and papers. For the last five years or so, she has been absorbed with painting, however, and hasn't created any drawings at all.

COMING SOON
Amelie von Wulffen's solo exhibition, at Reena Spaulings Fine Art, New York, Mar. 8–Apr. 15.

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You can do a lot of drawings and just flip through them, take them or leave them, von Wulffen explains. But with an oil painting, every brushstroke is important. Painting is a puzzle and a challenge, but it allows you to bring together different registers of reality, to synthesize them in a single place. This is where its appeal lies for von Wulffen: how *can* you depict reality now in this ancient, historically fraught medium? Many aspects of her recent paintings seem to be borrowed from the past: interiors typical of a century or so ago; landscapes painted in various outmoded ways; figures lifted from children's books or nursery rhymes of a certain vintage, especially the cruel ones like the cautionary tales in *Struwwelpeter*, published by Heinrich Hoffmann in 1845.

In some of von Wulffen's paintings, a crackled varnish applied to the surface splits like dried skin; the works *want* to look old. Some motifs may be traced back to sources like a late nineteenth-century farmhouse interior by Austrian painter Franz Defregger or a landscape from a blatantly kitsch kind of Parisian street-market impressionism. In other works, the act of painting itself produces content with no clear reference. Monstrous creatures emerge from the imagination of the artist and appear in bizarre, dreamlike scenarios: chubby, devil-like children being consumed by flames, or a group of cats and toxically colored furry animals

sitting around a wooden table, blowing smoke rings or looking glum, chin in paw. Once this kind of weird imagery emerges, the challenge is to retain its strangeness without falling into the realm of kitsch, says von Wulffen. It requires a deft mental choreography to follow an impulse toward the unknown, to give in to affinity and association, or to indulge in the pleasure of painting for its own sake yet to draw back before it all becomes too much.

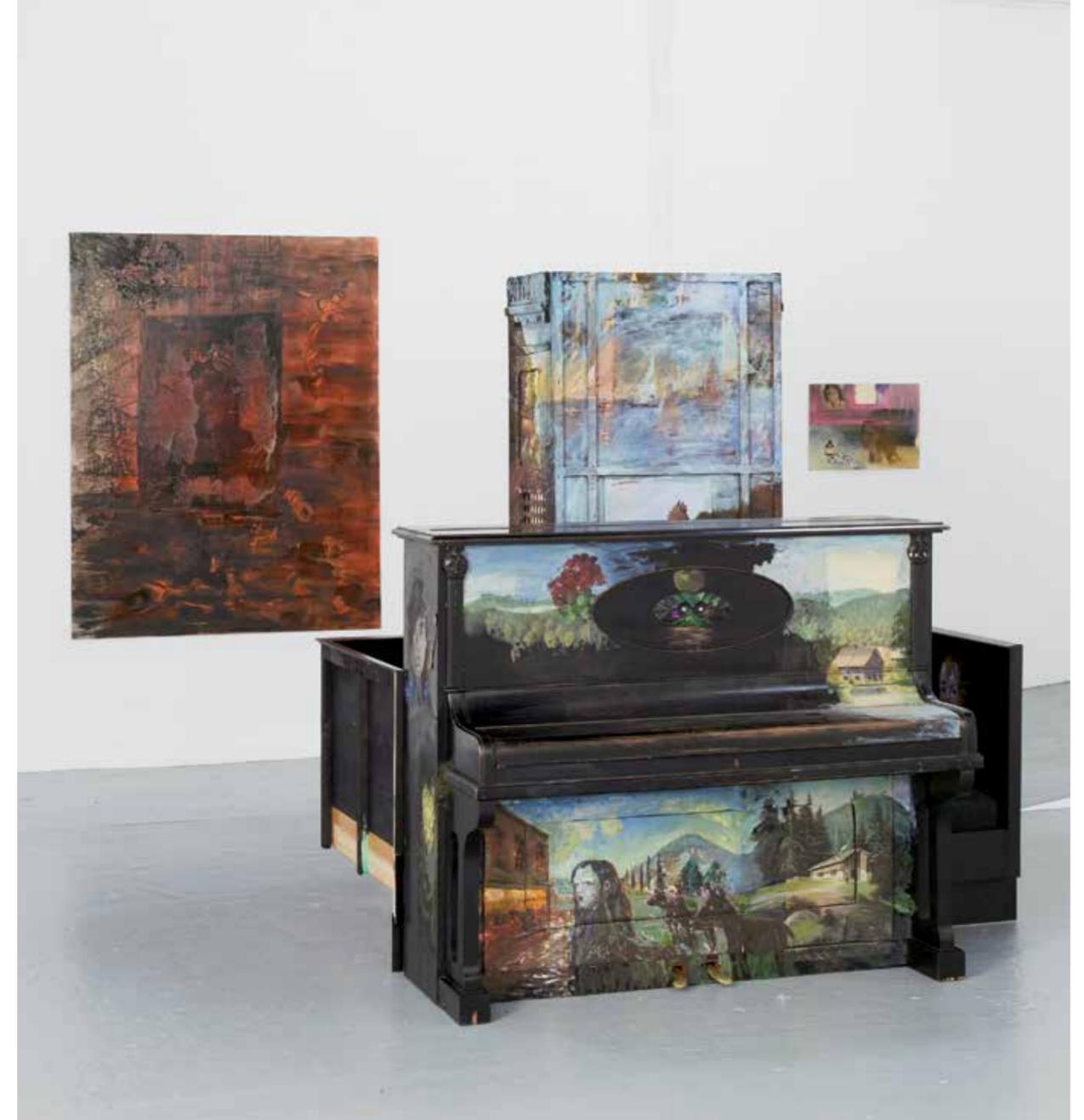
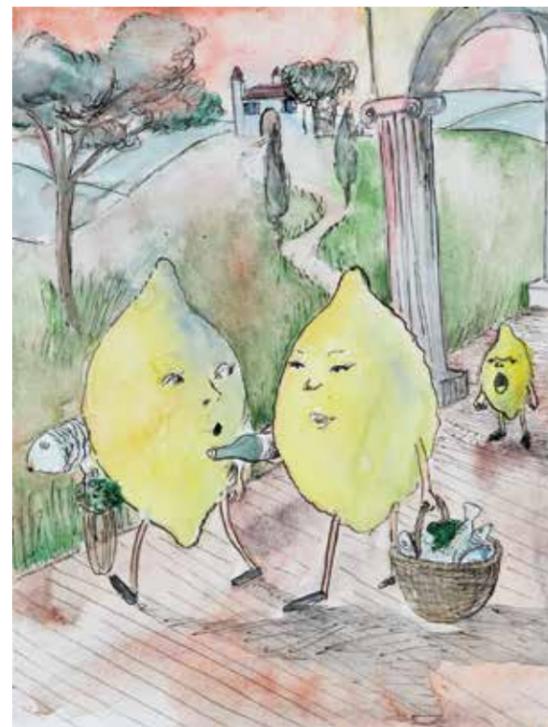
PAINTING IN OIL on canvas is relatively new for von Wulffen, who was born in Oberpfalz in southeast Germany in 1966 and has been living in Berlin and exhibiting widely since the late 1990s. Until around 2010, she worked primarily on large, thick sheets of paper, often incorporating photographs onto the surface. The photographs' imagery was then extended with acrylic, ink, and watercolor washes, creating fantastic dreamscapes that seem to solder together several different emotional ranges, mediums, and kinds of depiction. Her exhibitions took on a Gesamtkunstwerk installation form, often including pieces of painted furniture or decorative motifs painted directly onto the gallery walls, proposing a spatial continuum between the discrete elements.

Around 2008, on the heels of the market crash, came a period of intense introspection during which von Wulffen



Left, a sheet from *At the Cool Table*, 2013, pencil on paper, 67 pages, 14 by 11¼ inches each.

Right, Untitled, 2014, ink and watercolor on paper, 12¼ by 9 inches.



View of von Wulffen's exhibition "The Misjudged Bimfi," 2017, at Studio Voltaire, London.

produced several series of relatively small-scale drawings. The first, created for an artist's book in 2010, consists of self-portraits. Along with pencil or watercolor renderings, many of which she made while looking in the mirror, the series includes some sketchlike group scenarios inscribed with handwritten texts resembling journal entries. These works developed into a new series of pencil drawings with an explicitly diaristic tone—von Wulffen calls them "ego-comics"—featuring scenes from the life of a middle-aged female artist. The studio visit, the gallery opening, the post-opening dinner with its coveted "cool table," auction price qualms, recurrent shoulder pains, difficult friendships—these and other artistic, social, and sexual anxieties are described with shocking veracity. The drawings lay bare the shame,

humiliation, fear, and stress that flow beneath the life of an artist, replete as it is with competitive drives and social responsibilities.

Another suite of drawings made around the same time adopts a children's illustration style to portray anthropomorphized fruits and vegetables or, occasionally, tools. The scenes range from the banal (two bananas, an apple, a pear, and a tomato lounge around in a fruit bowl, smoking, drinking, and chatting) to the slightly awkward (a group of paintbrushes sit anxiously in a circle on wooden chairs in a group therapy session) to the unspeakable (tomatoes chained up in a cellar are sodomized by potatoes). Even the most innocuous scenes have an undercurrent of tension, shame, misunderstanding, or violence. Here the artist presents social

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distress. In one, philosopher and card-carrying Nazi Martin Heidegger sits at the table; in another, the ghost of poet Paul Celan (a Romanian-born Jew who wrote in German, despite having been interned in one prison camp while his parents died in another) hovers palely above it.

These paintings approach the difficult subject of the familiar and homely tinged with historical guilt, where an ordinary family scene grows heavy with the weight of things unsaid—repressed traumas passed down through generations. The pictures try to give form to the swamp of unresolved history, with its strong gravitational pull and resistance to the buoyant flow of time. Von Wulffen belongs to the generation of *Kriegsenkel* or grandchildren of the war, who have had to contend with the intransigent silence of their parents and grandparents regarding question of individual responsibility in Nazi Germany. A rash of literature from von Wulffen's generation (those born between

1960 and 1975) has appeared in Germany in the last five years or so, examining the transgenerational inheritance of war-related complicity and shame. "The Dead in the Swamp" was von Wulffen's own attempt to come to grips with this. Several of the paintings are based on family snapshots—for instance, an untitled work from 2016 showing a household musical recital in which the child sitting at the piano, eyes downcast, is the artist herself, while her siblings accompany her on flute and violin.

THIS ATMOSPHERE OF ordinary middle-class pastimes threaded through with pressure and anxiety transfers to the artist's more fantastical paintings. In one overwhelmingly brown composition, the dining table is attended by a variety of furred creatures, silent and long-faced (*The Inheritance*, 2016). This atmosphere curdles into a strange sadistic dependency in paintings such as the untitled work in which a curly-haired



Untitled, 2016, oil on canvas, 20 by 24 inches.

relations in the starkest manner possible, yet her use of carrots or pliers in place of people makes the most painful or awkward situations palatable and even humorous. As artist Amy Sillman wrote, these works are "essentially very funny, and not a joke at all."¹

This compound stratum of anxiety, violence, and humor also undergirds the oil paintings von Wulffen has been focusing on since around 2012. While her drawings in pencil or watercolor convey lightness and speed, these densely worked pictures suggest contrary qualities. For von Wulffen, there is something elementary about the nonverbal medium of painting. In the studio, she shows me volumes on Pompeii murals (in particular, a strange image of Pygmies fighting and riding crocodiles with harnesses) and seventeenth-century Flemish still-life paintings in which two artists collaborated, one responsible for the fruit-laden tabletop and the other for a background of putti and clouds floating above it, yielding a single work with two completely heterogeneous painting styles. Explor-

ing the history of painting, von Wulffen investigates how wildly different elements can be packed into the pictorial space of a canvas and made convincing. How is it that such works produce a version of reality more satisfying than the actuality the artists faced? Oil paintings are inevitably tied to historical tradition, but for von Wulffen this tradition has always been related to the medium's current agency.

Which begs another question: what *is* going on in von Wulffen's strange compositions, which bring together eclectic painting styles, nineteenth-century German folk scenes, furry creatures, and malevolent schoolgirls? The works shown in her 2016 exhibition "Der Tote im Sumpf" (The Dead in the Swamp) at Galerie Barbara Weiss in Berlin, as well as those in her subsequent show at Studio Voltaire in London, are largely interior views. The dining table is a recurrent motif, sometimes copied directly from artists such as Defregger or Gustave Caillebotte and frequently seen in a rustic Bavarian interior. But in von Wulffen's hands, these are joyless, claustrophobic dining scenes infused with latent



The Inheritance, 2016, oil on wood, 28¾ by 37 inches.



Untitled, 2016,
oil on wood, 16½ by
23¾ inches.

girl looks despondently at a kitten passed out beside a bottle that appears to be marked *ETHER*. In another work, a girl lies on her bed, incapacitated by her overgrown fingernails, long and curled, which prevent her from playing the piano we see beside her. This work is swathed in a dense Pepto-Bismol pink; others are dark red or a shrill absinthe green, the paint often applied on top of a layer of crackled lacquer, giving the pictures a weird otherworldliness. And yet the oppression in von Wulffen's works is alleviated by the dynamism of their diverse styles, materials, surfaces, and motifs, and by a thread of dark humor running through them. They are attempts to give form to a psychological reality, to depict the shape of an inner life. As writer Manfred Hermes put it, "only out of such uncertainty will something perhaps emerge that resembles certainty."²

The works I saw in von Wulffen's studio last May and September are for a show that opens next month at Reena Spaulings Fine Art, New York. A large horizontal painting, propped up on an easel the second time I visited, is essentially a landscape combining disparate elements. A couple in old-fashioned garb stand in front of a churchlike building with a red-tiled roof; on the right, a sketched-out boy and girl run hand in hand down a country path. Meanwhile, other ghostly sketches seem to hover on the painting's surface—a head of John Travolta circa 1978 with a feather cut,

which has already appeared in other works by von Wulffen; cute storybook figures such as an anthropomorphized teapot; elegant wave forms on the horizon. These accumulated fragments seem to drift together to create a dreamlike, psychologically charged environment, as the relentless interiority of the artist's previous works opens out onto outdoor scenes.

Many of the paintings were still unfinished when I saw them, but their nature was clear. Though the compositions feature south German townscapes or kitschy Parisian cityscapes, the figures inhabiting them have an ambivalent relationship to their surroundings; they don't seem to belong. Sometimes parts of a scenario have been cut out of found paintings and seamed into the composition, highlighting the temporal disjunction at the center of von Wulffen's practice. Given painting's implicit connections with the past, her work seems to argue, the medium is always out of time. The challenge is to create a space within one's painting that articulates that very disparity while also saying something about the present moment. ○

1. Amy Sillman, "Why Amelie von Wulffen Is Funny" in *Amelie von Wulffen: Works 1998–2016*, Isabel Podeschwa and Amelie von Wulffen, eds., London, Koenig Books Ltd., 2017, p. 146.
2. Manfred Hermes, "Painting as Monstrosity," in *Amelie von Wulffen: Works 1998–2016*, p. 245.



Opposite,
Untitled, 2017, oil
on canvas, 47¼ by
39¾ inches.