

Amelie von Wulffen

KW Institute for Contemporary Art,
Berlin, Germany

Amelie von Wulffen's exhibition at KW, her first institutional solo in Berlin, opens with 'Die Graue Partizipation' (The Grey Participation, 2001) – a series of faint, colourless sketches the artist made from photographs she had taken at concerts and club nights, mostly showing backs of heads and cropped limbs. It's an elegantly tongue-in-cheek introduction to an artist best known for works that are the antithesis of grey and all its connotations. The title can be read as a reference to both the partial presence of the one who wields the pen and the only half-mindedly engaged subjects she renders. The exterior world, it seems, looks sparse through Von Wulffen's eyes. As such, the far more bombastic canvases in the subsequent rooms should be understood, rather, as interiors: how the world appears when reflected in our much wilder, more intricate collective subconscious.

Dense in subject matter, the more than 250 works on display offer a full immersion into that disturbing mental landscape. Think log cabins, grandparents and creepy-looking families of pigs, as depicted in *Musische Mutter* (Artistic Mother, 2019);

brown paint is smeared onto the gallery walls for flies made out of blue mussels to feast on; elsewhere, *Biene Maja* (Maya the Bee, 2020) is a sculpture of the iconic cartoon figure sitting in a pool of her own piss. From anal to oral phase, primal scene to primal scream, in KW's great hall numerous clichés of psychoanalysis are given a dark and eccentric makeover. In an untitled canvas from 2019, a pathos-ridden painting-within-a-painting of sailboats was joined, as if on a mantelpiece, by glued-on Christmas cards showing awkwardly staged photographs of siblings. In *Schwestern im Schrank* (Sisters in a Closet, 2019–20), a pre-Raphaelite composition with two girls integrates a painted rendition of a Wall's ice cream menu. Von Wulffen is an expert at spotting the outgrowths of German folklore and romanticism in packaging, adverts and children's television, and welding them together with their historical counterparts – or, at least, our warped ideas of them. These simultaneous references are not a matter of incongruity or juxtaposition, but manifestations of equivalence.

Though weird in the extreme, Von Wulffen's motifs don't read like an ironic employment of kitsch, chosen for their outlandishness. Rather, the accumulated works constitute a kind of *mise-en-abyme*, wherein each piece is the core of an

uncannily familiar and potentially infinite interior. An untitled installation from 2020, for instance, comprises a crowd of eccentric seashell characters standing on a set of podiums painted with a sunset, planets and the bedroom of the artist's father – a perennially recurring figure in her work. The ensemble makes a foreground to the surrounding paintings, many of which feature some other variety of horizon visible, say, through a window or another artwork. This freefall into the abyss of Von Wulffen's image-world is intensified by a total lack of critical distance. For, while there's a complex sense of unease to how the artist views herself, often included as a character in the works – such as, bizarrely, with a tail in *Huftier* (Hoofed Animal, 2019) – she never installs some self-conscious layer of banality or conceptual frame as an escape-clause. And this is ultimately what makes Von Wulffen's paintings so compelling: they did not emerge from an understanding of the painting tradition as time-honoured or privileged but as a mode of production as naturally corny as any other. In fact, it might just be the perfect medium to represent that sentimental and fucked-up junction between memory and fantasy, dreams and the basest of desires.

— Kristian Vistrup Madsen



Amelie von Wulffen,
Musische Mutter
(Artistic Mother), 2019,
oil on linen