

Amelie von Wulffen

GALERIE BARBARA WEISS



Amelie von Wulffen,
Untitled, 2016, oil on
canvas, 19 5/8 × 23 5/8".

The inner life of the German soul is a gloomy thing. The pristine white fabrics of traditional costumes vie to be the brightest, yet the mood around the lunch table is oddly depressed. And here are Martin Buber and Martin Heidegger, bathed in a glaring green aura; they are seated at a table with two other interlocutors, but the conversation seems to have come to a halt. Paul Celan hovers above another circle like a colorless ghost. Elsewhere, children dutifully playing music in an austere farmhouse parlor seem to be lost in another world—a woman by a window, clad in antiquated garb, takes no notice of them. And then there is the stuff of the unconscious and repression: demons and hobgoblins, grotesque catlike creatures, the dramas of teenage angst, scenes from a Düreresque hell—welcome to the universe of Amelie von Wulffen's painting.

In her recent solo exhibition "*Der Tote im Sumpf*" (The Dead in the Swamp), von Wulffen presented fifteen paintings and one ceramic. As intimated by the show's title, with its deliberate overtones of television crime thriller or dime novel, buried strata are festering and inexorably pushing toward the surface. For some time now, von Wulffen has been elaborating a peculiar kind of history painting updated with doses of irony, grotesquerie, and unfettered imagination. Many of her pictures stage contests between different painting styles—one canvas can contain Impressionist, Cubist, Surrealist, and informel elements. Some of the references to the history of art are quite specific: This show featured quotations from the Austrian painter Franz von Defregger's *Bauernstube* (Peasant Quarters), 1868, and Gustave Caillebotte's *Le Déjeuner* (Luncheon), 1876; several of the more nightmarish elements might have recalled the work of Alfred Kubin. The children with their instruments, for example, were posed inside the setting from Defregger, stuck to the painting's foreground as though collaged into it; this impression was reinforced by their modern apparel. In fact, von Wulffen based the group of figures on a private childhood photograph of herself and her siblings; the adaptation cranked up the oppressively stuffy coziness of the original painting to the point of travesty.

Defregger and Caillebotte liked to paint people sitting around tables, and von Wulffen revived this compositional scheme in several of her works, which show figures sitting with their heads bowed over their soup bowls, some turning their backs to the beholder. She inserted the poet Celan's likeness into the smaller of the two, making him float above the company like a phantom. This turned the scene into a narrative of exclusion: Celan's parents were deported by the Nazis and died in a concentration camp; in postwar Germany, he of all people was derided by some of his fellow writers of the Gruppe 47 when he read them his now-celebrated poem "Death Fugue." Von Wulffen's painting thus combines a multitude of stylistic layers with complex thematic undercurrents. Her works often address issues of groups, marginalization, and the creative individual as outsider—a theme the artist has pinpointed in a historical perspective, but also with reference to the contemporary art scene, in the amusingly spot-on digital slide show *Am kühlen Tisch* (At the Cool Table), 2013, of which there is a comic-strip version, though neither was on display.

Presenting brilliant paintings enlivened by a sense of often-black humor, von Wulffen once again demonstrated that autonomous art can broach the political without becoming illustrative or moralizing. In this instance, she focused on the ugly underside of a clichéd notion of ethnic-cultural homogeneity that fuels mechanisms of stigmatization and exclusion—mechanisms that, sad to say, have recently made themselves felt afresh in Germany and beyond.

—Jens Asthoff

Translated from German by Gerrit Jackson.