

154

2021

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sche Bildwelten, die sich über die Ernsthaftigkeit vieler ihrer Akteur*innen und die tradierten Erwartungshaltungen ihrer Betrachter*innen amüsieren. Häufig weisen Lays skulpturale Bilder dabei stilistische Ähnlichkeit mit einer aufwendig inszenierten Produkt- oder Sachfotografie auf. Doch stets unterläuft der Künstler deren Warenförmigkeit durch die Dysfunktionalisierung oder Autodestruktion seines Gegenstandes. Etwa, wenn sich eine Siebträgermaschine in der mehrteiligen Serie *mod. CLASSIC* (2019) langsam in ihrer Vitrine selbst mit Kaffee ertränkt. In *ZIP TIE (s)* (2017) wirft ein knallgelber, für den Gebrauch viel zu kurzer Kabelbinder den Schatten einer Gabel auf den kühlblauen Untergrund. Das kann als historische Referenz an André Kertész' berühmte Fotografie *Die Gabel, Paris* (1928) gelesen werden, muss es aber nicht. Vielmehr erzeugen solch surrealistische Kompositionen eine visuelle Komik, die durch Momente der Irritation zur reflexiven Distanznahme einlädt. Auf diese Weise formulieren Lays Fotografien trotz ihrer Albernheit eine radikale Bildkritik, die die Absurdität fotografischer Indexikalitätsansprüche mithilfe magischer Bildwelten offenlegt.

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Europe: Ancient Future

HALLE FÜR KUNST Steiermark, Graz,
23. 4. – 15. 8. 2021

by Max L. Feldman

“Modernism is our antiquity,” runs T. J. Clark’s adage in *Farewell to an Idea: Episodes from a History of Modernism* (p. 3). According to Fredric Jameson in *The Ancients and the Postmoderns*, however, Alexander Kluge puts it slightly differently — modernism is our classicism, he said, apparently (p. 3). These claims are subtly but significantly different. If modernism is our antiquity, it is no longer *ours*; if it is our *classicism*, it still provides what Wittgenstein called the “depth grammar” for the visual and conceptual language of contemporary art. The shared point is this: though it might only be a century or so old, modernism is distant enough that its great works seem like ruins to us, as mysterious and uninhabited as any site of archaeological interest.

This explains part of the starting point for *Europe: Ancient Future*, but only part. It helps to make sense of the *ancient future* dynamic more than the *Europe* bit, unless this is taken to mean that the concept of Europe needs to be decentered, made strange to itself, just as the possibilities of modernism are no longer self-evident to us.

This is clearest in three sets of works. There are, firstly, those that directly refer to classical art and architecture: James Welling’s four photographs of the Acropolis and Athenian Agora and Shahryar Nashat’s blocks of gray and black marble pedestals on pink palettes with wheels, *Mother on Wheels (Nero Marquina 1 + 2)* (both 2016). Then there are those which deviate from classical techniques while either showing us or questioning the ideals of proportion and harmony: *Reclining Pan* and *Sleeping Boy* (both 2021), Oliver Laric’s classical-looking sculptures using ultra-contemporary materials and

techniques, contrasted with Barbara Kapusta’s work using disembodied hands. The *Europe* focus is crystallized, finally, in Franz Kapfer’s disturbing installation *At My Back, the Ruins of Europe* (2019–21).

It begins, however, before you even step inside the building, where Sandro Droschl, curator and director of the just renamed HALLE FÜR KUNST Steiermark, has arranged for the building’s façade to be temporarily masked by the *Temple of Europa*. It is an Ionic temple porch: six columns made from steel and Styrodur with a relief of Europa, the Phoenician consort of Zeus, riding a bull. The effect is double: it makes the building look like it’s in costume — like a guest



Oliver Laric, *Reclining Pan*; *Sleeping Boy*, both 2021. Installation view at HALLE FÜR KUNST Steiermark, Graz, 2021. Photo: kunst-dokumentation.com.

at a toga party — and at the same time it looks like postmodern historicist architecture, in which contemporary styles refer to those of the past, introducing if not reflecting the ancient futurity at work in Welling, Laric, and Kapusta.

James Welling’s photographs, *Head of a Goddess, Acropolis Museum. Karyatid, Erechtheion. North Porch*, and *Torso of a Youth* (all 2019), were all made on aluminum composite paneling using a UV printer. By integrating layers of paint onto the images, Welling reimagines these objects in color, as they would have been all those centuries ago, further disenchanting them. *Acropolis Museum. Karyatid* shows us the intricate hair and back of one of the canephor — a caryatid holding a basket on her head, possibly carrying sacred objects used during the feasts of Athena and Artemis — from the Acropolis Museum in Athens. The colors look warped, murky, like a pixelated screen. *Torso of a Youth* shows an image of anatomical perfection splattered with flecks of black, orange, yellow, and blue digital ink. Unlike the other three images, Welling used analogue techniques, specifically oil pigment, to produce *Head of a Goddess*, a head with broken nose, lips, eye, and hairline, that seems not only to be floating in midair, but appears also to be crying.

Where Welling’s photographs are digitally distorted *representations* of ancient Greek religious art, Laric’s sculptures are one-to-one

scale *reproductions* of sculptures from the Renaissance that return to the forms and ideals of the ancient world — *Reclining Pan* reconfigures a sculpture of a human-goat hybrid by Francesco da Sangallo (ca. 1535), but the provenance of *Sleeping Boy* is unclear. More obvious is Laric’s attempt to undermine the stable relationship between copy and original, a staple of both European art theory since Plato, but also part of the romantic concept of genius that contemporary art still grapples with. This is because they are made by measuring and copying the originals using the most advanced technical capacities currently available to form parts of the originals with advanced materials. Not only does this challenge classical ideals about proportion and harmony, since the different body parts — Pan’s head, body, and hooves, the boy’s head, torso, thighs, calves, and feet — look like they’ve been sutured together from other sculptures, producing subtle but noticeable contrasts in color and tone. It also destabilizes ideals about skill and craftsmanship, because, in principle, anybody can produce and distribute their own versions of these works, since access to the digital code is free.

Barbara Kapusta, meanwhile, offers six porcelain sculptures — *Absorbing Body*, *Anxiously Leaking*, *Body Liking It*, *Damp Being*, *Leaking Body*, and *Open Body* (all 2020) — and a six-minute video, *Empathic Creatures* (2018). In each of the sculptures, hands (or fragments of hands) paw at the open space with no pedestal to support them. And without the rest of a body — or, in the case of *Anxiously Leaking*, *Body Liking It*, and *Open Body*, even a wrist or arm — to give them context, the viewer has no idea what kind of physique they belong to: human or alien, suffering or acting heroically, subjugated or in a position of power, living or dead. Though, like the sculptures, *Empathic Creatures* shows us incorporeal limbs, here they belong to four different liquescent bodies, freely flowing in a simulated landscape, combining and recombining at will to produce new, previously unimaginable, forms.

At My Back, the Ruins of Europe by Franz Kapfer, however, offers a completely different take on an ancient future. The work consists of dozens of frightening wooden shields showing symbols of various European far-right groups, including the black sun and various crossed swords, and riffs on the two-barred cross (Byzantine in origin, ironically) dangling from the ceiling by rusty chains. There is one light source, a single unshaded bulb, allowing the shields to throw eerie shadows on the floor and walls of the white cube, whose powers of de- and recontextualization make it look less like a dungeon for ideas with no merit and more like a political message of its own, however ingenuous: that fascist ideologists recycle “ancient” symbols, giving them a false antiquity to promote an idea of Europe rooted in blood and soil and not frail, imperfect democratic institutions.

Whatever we make of the uneven relationship between the two “sides” of the curatorial concept, there is a clear problem that goes unacknowledged. It’s hard for any “ancient future” to not be conservative. If “ancient” imagery is left alone to be organized or reproduced outright using “futuristic” technology, as in Welling, Laric, and Kapfer (but unlike Kapusta), then it says nothing about how to make something substantially new, only ever more sophisticated-looking heritage pieces, let alone how to rethink a concept as big as Europe.

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