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Michael Kunze: Halcyon Days

The work of Michael Kunze (born in Munich in 1961) is an extraordinary feature on Germany's artistic landscape. His paintings are filled with reflections on literature and philosophy and on the history of art and architecture. He translates these reflections into enigmatic and seemingly irrational sceneries, architectural constructions and utopian landscapes. Relationships, connections and possible meanings remain veiled; the elements juxtaposed on the canvas appear paradoxical at times and demand that viewers engage in intense dialogue with the works, generally leaving them divided as to how they should be interpreted.

The first comprehensive exhibition of Kunze's work, the show in Düsseldorf features some 70 pieces from the past 20 years, including the monumental *Tomorrow/Morning* (6 x 6 m, 1998-1992). Kunze's oeuvre can be seen as a running commentary on Arnold Böcklin's *Isle of the Dead*, which he regards as the point where Modernism split up into two currents: an official one running in a straight line, and an unofficial one tracing a meandering, serpentine course. Along the first we find Cézanne, Impressionism and the subsequent succession of "avant-garde" movements that shaped our "official" understanding of Modernism until the late 20th century. The "other" Modernism, the one inspired by *Isle of the Dead*, exists in the shadows and is less interested in "progress", instead taking a labyrinthine, circuitous route that is often infused with darkness and shrouded in mystery. Following Böcklin in this tradition we find, among others, Giorgio de Chirico; early Surrealism; 20th-century filmmakers like L. Buñuel, P. P. Pasolini and A. Tarkovsky; and, much later, Lars von Trier's film *Antichrist* (2009). Visual artists who took the second path include "lone wolves" such as Balthus, Francis Bacon, and Anselm Kiefer, all of whom pursued a "pagan" concept of art that affirmed the power of the image and was thus profoundly anti-Protestant – but in a manner far-removed from the pop-culture, late-modern fascination with "Karl Marx and Coca Cola".

From within the branches of this family tree, Kunze seeks out connections that have now all but faded into obscurity. The idea of the **halcyon days** is a central motif in his work. The phrase describes a brief period during the winter solstice when the air on the Mediterranean coast is cold and no wind blows; the name is derived from the halcyon, a type of kingfisher that breeds during this time. Nietzsche, who was plagued by terrible headaches, used to say the times when his pain eased were his halcyon days. The metaphor's cultural implications, which Nietzsche's *Zarathustra* unites with the vision of the dawn of a new era, are the focus of Kunze's work as he embarks on his visual travels through history.

Time and again, Kunze paints architectural compositions that appear under a cloudy sky and steeped in dramatic Mediterranean light. Complex contrasts of form and content dominate his work. Fragments of modern and pre-modern architecture are juxtaposed and somehow fuse to produce a single entity that forces us to question our traditional notions of development and progress. Thus Kunze builds a bridge between Mies van der Rohe and the totalitarian architecture of the 20th century and creates a link between Frank Lloyd Wright's Fallingwater and the Villa d'Este in Tivoli. Having established these relationships, Kunze shows up the notion that the buildings could ever have been considered incompatible as absurd.

Some of the figures that appear in Kunze's work are controversial provocateurs, as in *Les Messieurs d'Avignon* (2005-2006); some are actors from specific plays and films that he references; others are stereotypes, faces devoid of body and expression that appear random and interchangeable and call to mind the characters that populate modern-day computer games. Some of his works resemble surreal, deconstructivist theatre backdrops of incredible intricacy; full of narrative traps, they recall the enigmatic, elegiac quality of de Chirico's empty spaces and the delusional madness of Piranesi's *Carceri*, with their monumental design from which there is no escape. Kunze often creates contextual relationships using little more than an atmospheric connection, and then uses this as a point of departure to pierce the hermetic textuality of the sources that are at the root of his works. Mostly he leaves it up to the viewer to tease out the connections and then either find a possible "resolution" or leave the mysteriously charged stasis as it is.

Clues to Kunze's referential framework can be found in his writings as well as in the titles he uses and in the pictures themselves. Some of these texts are included in the exhibition catalogue. However, it is important to note that, while they do help us gain a better understanding of his intentions, they should not be read as any kind of "user's manual" on his artistic practice. Instead, they should be regarded as on an equal footing, as expressions in their own right that exist within the same maze charted in the photographs Kunze has been taking in Greece for the past two decades – images of ruined, abandoned places that at once idealise the locations and seek to document them as archaeological records.

Michal Kunze's work is distinguished by the way he links different, seemingly unrelated layers and fuses dream with reality and the conscious with the subconscious. The resulting, palimpsest-like paintings force viewers to enter into dialogue with them and find their own interpretations by sifting through all the many theoretical layers and references to art history, literature and film. Kunze does not believe that painting in itself is interesting, but rather: "What is interesting is painting as literature, literature as photography, photography as readymade, readymade as film, film as architecture, architecture as music, and so on and so forth."

A comprehensive catalogue (approx. 414 pages) will be published by Buchhandlung Walther König to accompany the exhibition. It will feature texts by Zdenek Felix, Gregor Jansen, Udo Kittelmann, Michael Kunze and John C. Welchman. Price at the exhibition: €40

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