

Cash, Clowns, and Carnival

Money and the market: Two German artists on view in Chelsea

by Jerry Saltz
June 22nd, 2006 1:50 PM

The art world is now so big, spread out, and interconnected that in the near future there will probably be no single art capital. Nevertheless many Berliners believe that their city may be the next New York soon. Indeed, the Berlin art scene is loaded with gifted people. Artists are moving there from all over, the museum culture is extraordinary, rents are incredibly low, galleries are large and raw, and dealers are working together. Last month I attended a full-tilt sit-down dinner in that city for 500, co-hosted by 30 Berlin dealers. After dessert, and before Martin Creed's band played, American gallerist Andrew Kreps, known for his powers of observation, whispered, "This could never happen in New York." He was right. But it doesn't need to. Here, there are so many art worlds happening contiguously, concurrently, and continuously that even though we could use the cheap rents and some loosening up there's no need to band together. At least not yet.



Cosima von Bonin gets the hang of it
image: Friedrich Petzel Gallery

Martin Eder
Marianne Boesky
535 West 22nd Street
Through July 1

Cosima von Bonin
Friedrich Petzel
537 West 22nd Street
Through July 14

See also:
• **States of Change**
Life into death and death into whatever
Jerry Saltz reviews Halsey Rodman's *The Navigators Quarters Must Not Be Disturbed*

In Germany I had a couple of encounters that gave me a glimpse of what's going on there, a hint of what many Berliners think of us, and a way to gauge two shows of German artists currently on view in the same Chelsea building. Both brushes had to do with money and the market. The first was actually cumulative; numerous dealers repeatedly and snippily told me that New York is "all about the market" and "only concerned with money." This was often said in huge galleries amid sold-out shows of pricey art. Initially I just acceded and shrugged. After a few days of this I got my "these-colors-don't-run" dander up and huffily said to a group of dealers, "You show the same artists that are shown in New York. You participate in the same art fairs and sell to the same collectors. The euro is stronger than the dollar and you're making as much or more money as anyone. New York galleries are slicker, but Berlin is as 'about the market' as anywhere." They all looked at one another, then gave me that sly smile that says "Poor silly American."

The other experience took place in the Berlin branch of Eigen + Art, the excellent Leipzig-based gallery that represents Neo Rauch and many of the "hot young Leipzig painters" who are a sensation among international collectors. There, a gaggle of tony women surrounded the beleaguered director and demanded, "We would like to buy some Leipzig paintings. Are there any left in the back room?" When told, "No," they quickly asked, "Are there any in galleries nearby?" Rauch himself says collectors now reason, "Is he young? Is he from Leipzig? Then I buy." Of course they only say "he."

The Berlin-based, Nuremberg-and-Dresden-trained Martin Eder isn't from Leipzig, and at 38 he's not exactly young, but he is a "he" who shows at Eigen + Art. Therefore it's not surprising that his big, blotchy, heavy-handed paintings of naked young women with kitty-cats, birds, bunnies, and balloons, now on view at Boesky, are all the rage. *Sleek* magazine says Eder is "adored by Hollywood's movie aristocracy" and that "increasing numbers of European collectors are falling for his artwork." *Time* magazine's European edition called Eder "one of the most up-and-coming artists in Germany."

Eder says his paintings are "about the sadness and emptiness within me." He claims he's "running behind the trends and artificial values of our Western world." But his paintings are little more than testosterone-driven post-adolescent derivative kitsch. Eder's canvases are too ambitious and ironic to be the worst currently on view in New York. He has a feel for the space between photography, thrift-store painting, pinup-girl posters, and old-school punk nihilism. And he's a great technician. But combining images of racy young things with cute animals is blatant to the point of banality and gives you little more than tinsel to think about. (This was done far better 20 years ago by Walter Robinson.) Mostly, Eder's work is so gaudy and brazen that it brings to mind disavowed German neo-Expressionists like Helmut Middendorf and Rainer Fetting.

That Eder is not really a painter and is more of a would-be conceptualist is clear from his previous superior installations consisting of words painted on walls. The 13 paintings at Boesky, all sold by the second week of the show for around \$60,000 each, look like they were done by an artist on automatic pilot. In fact, all but one are dated May, 2006. It should be amusing to watch the owners of these cliché-ridden things trying to fob them off to the even more clueless in the near future.

At Petzel, in the exhibition of Cologne-based Cosima von Bonin, 44, the mood changes to enigmatic and investigative. The installation consists of several stately oversize handmade stuffed animals, a number of handsome but generic-looking quilted-and-sewed paintings, three grandly built Sol LeWitt-like towers, and two mini hamburger stands among still more bric-a-brac. Overall, the show is conventional in its controlled effects and its connections to commodity art. Yet it offers a richly diabolical experience. It's like walking into a carnival or a department store, then finding yourself onstage. Scale continually shifts, objects go from over- to undersized, glitches in perception form. Mount a tower to look at a stuffed animal and you're on display. Paranoia and self-consciousness replace clichés of appropriation.

The sewn paintings are beautiful, although they evoke similar efforts by Sigmar Polke, Martin Kippenberger, and Rosemarie Trockel. Yet this very echo creates an eerie familiarity. You can see why von Bonin has been called "one of the most important artists of her generation" and why the Berlin art scene feels so confident.

States of Change

There are fairly exact demarcation points where things change from one state to another. Water freezes at 32 degrees, turns to steam at 212 degrees, and becomes plasma at around 12,000 degrees. Horses go from a walk to a trot to a run at precise moments. Halsey Rodman never comes right out and says so, but in some sculptural-material way he's an explorer of the ultimate demarcation point: The transformation of life into death and death into whatever.

The title of Rodman's intellectually arresting, visually stimulating, borderline metaphysical if somewhat indeterminate exhibition at Guild & Greyshkul is "The Navigator's Quarters Must Not Be Disturbed." The sentence conjures a warning. On a more philosophical level it's a caveat that might be from some ancient text or unseen force to would-be searchers for what was once called the Prime Mover.

The gallery looks like a toy-maker's shop or the inside of a clock and is divided into thirds by a tall silver Styrofoam wall. Within each section are objects. The largest and most gripping is a prone double figure that looks like one body is hovering above the other. Elsewhere, there are bottles with plumes of aluminum-foil smoke, lamps, tables, honeycombed-patterned drawings, and several Möbius-like configurations.

Halsey's work can sometimes seem disjointed and obscure. And there's a sort of structural tension lacking at the core. Yet his art still manages to touch on the supernatural, science, the rituals of exhibition, and even the afterlife. It more than entices.

jsaltz@villagevoice.com