

ULRIKE MÜLLER

MUMOK – MUSEUM MODERNER KUNST STIFTUNG LUDWIG
WIEN

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ULRIKE MÜLLER conjures forth an other. This other is an as yet unidentified and genuinely differentiated being, a different sex, a different sensibility—one that not only deviates from but also exists within the still overwhelmingly male and straight modern teleologies of art. It's not surprising, then, that the word *others* is the starting point for two exhibitions by the New York-based artist now on view at Vienna's Museum Moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig Wien, both staged together with curator Manuela Ammer. The first, which closes February 21, is Müller's solo presentation on the museum's subterranean floor, tellingly titled "The old expressions are with us always and there are always others"; the second, "Always, Always, Others: Non-Classical Forays into Modernism," is a rehang on the ground floor from MUMOK's modern art collection and remains on view through May 8. Together, the shows propose an open-ended modernity—one that remains incomplete, is not secluded within the past, and has drifted into our present.

In the rehang, we find several pieces by well-known twentieth-century artists working in a wholly uncharacteristic mode. A case in point is architect Josef Hoffman, cofounder of the Wiener Werkstätte, who is represented here not via the orthogonal geometries with which we might associate his production, but by a series of works on paper sporting outlandish, twisted patterns. Elsewhere, Viennese painter Oswald Oberhuber, best known for his massive, thickly impastoed canvases, makes an appearance with *Dreieck Kreuz Malzeichen* (Triangle Cross Multiplication Sign), 1976, a seemingly endless series of symbols drawn with crayons on a humble sheet of paper. We also encounter several pieces from Oberhuber's *Museum im Museum* (Museum in the Museum), 1978, the artist's idiosyncratic collection of Austrian and German art of the 1920s and '30s. These works, including pieces by Friedl Dicker, Camilla Birke, and Max Oppenheimer,

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are shown alongside those by artists who figure more prominently in artists' art histories than in academic ones, such as the Austrian painter, writer, collector, and dealer Wolfgang Paalen—his cosmic, windswept *Bella Bella*, 1941, is on display. Paalen's decisive role in French Surrealism and pivotal influence on American Abstract Expressionism in the '40s is all too often hidden behind a profoundly multifarious and thus seemingly impenetrable oeuvre.

Müller and Ammer have also chosen to show works by the much-appreciated but oft-overlooked Chicago Imagists, with selections by Karl Wirsum, Gladys Nilsson, and Jim Nutt. Significantly, the Imagists are not presented as members of a discrete movement with a shared history and common affinities, but are rather brought into alliance with European attempts to refigure the many crises of the gendered body in industrial modernity. For example, the Chicago-based painter Christina Ramberg's storyboard-like acrylic painting *Ticklish Construction*, 1974, in which a stylized woman's torso is shown in profile, laced up in different girdle-like wrappings, hangs next to Dicker's densely layered photcollage *Frauen Schönheit durch Mutterschaft?* (Female Beauty Through Motherhood?), 1930. At the center of Dicker's work, we find the belittling image of an immiserated pregnant proletarian woman—a photograph used the same year in a work by Dicker's comrade John Heartfield—that serves to mock Käthe Kollwitz's romantic aesthetics of feminine victimization that were so popular at the time. Ramberg's contorted torso and Dicker's deaestheticized panorama of class antagonism are stylistically unrelated, but they are closely linked by a shared understanding of the female body as the locus of social containment. Indeed, Ammer and Müller hung all the art here according to its potential for dramatizing form as an always-social fact, for rendering modernity as an artistically and psychologically twisted state, with a deeply bodily, libidinal heritage that has yet to be unpacked.

MÜLLER'S OWN SHOW demonstrates that this refigured history of modernism remains active in the present. She poses abstraction neither as removed nor withdrawn, but as a socially determined realm of contemporary life, of corporeal and affective experience. Startlingly, her paintings elicit from abstraction its supposed opposite: a new kind of figuration, where the body and sex are everywhere yet not quite identifiable. Müller's work and its configuration in this exhibition appear as a meticulously formulated statement on the gendered history of (painterly) abstraction, and its relationship to a sexed return of figuration today.

The two works on the exhibition's first wall function as a key to the show. A portrait-size enamel-on-steel work is accompanied by a larger woven wool rug, the pair exemplifying two formats that have preoccupied Müller in recent years by virtue of the fact that they keep a careful distance

from painting. The enamel work's title (like that of all the fourteen enamel works on display) is *Others*, 2015, but unlike the other *Others*, the composition features an arrangement of shapes that is clearly representational: The rounded, eggshell-colored center shape takes the form of a vase, while the trio of dots in light green, bright red, and black at its top indicate blossoms. The kitschy figuration dominates the whole and acts as a wry riposte to the hard-edge commodity critique or technological utopianism of the enamel paintings of Marcel Broodthaers and László Moholy-Nagy. The rug, stuck to the wall, induces a similar effect. It is partitioned into four equal sections, containing, respectively, stripes, a field of black triangles, shapes suggestive of a schematic house, and the face of a black cat. Müller again lets cliché take over our perception, presenting a series of amuse-bouches, forms that oscillate between opaque abstraction and soothingly figurative allusion, between Bauhaus weaving of the '20s and its eternal return as a commodified pattern in contemporary interior design.

But there is nothing soothing about Müller's show. If the works on view play out the clichés of painting's (and, even more so, painterly abstraction's) proximity to stereotyped sentiment, the gendered flowers and cats (not to mention her pretty palette of pinks and soft blues) have the effect of twisting the knife—of “giving us the painting we deserve,” to paraphrase Douglas Crimp's notorious quip. In the first room, twelve enamel *Others* from 2015 hang in a straight line, followed by a series of twelve acrylic-on-paper works from 2014. The enamel surfaces are stunningly beautiful, the abstract compositions transfixing. Yet they lack geometric balance, coming to rest, teasingly, on the verge of aesthetic equilibrium. It is a playful cruelty: Our perception is lured in by comfortably gendered elements—the radiant palette, the deep colors—only to have the controlled graphic lopsidedness withhold any gratification, thus revealing something unruly and libidinous within.

With the acrylic drawings, the artist moves one step closer to painting's traditional tropes. In those works, figure and ground are clearly distinguished, and unlike in the enamel pieces, actual brushstrokes figure prominently. But they are not paintings yet: With their white wooden frames and allusive titles, such as *Nockerln*, *Profil*, *Hairy Situation*, and *Same Same*, the drawings are more like studies—provisional doodles destined to be remade as “full” artworks later on—as if Müller were dutifully going through traditional painting's hierarchical motions.

If, since the '80s, we have witnessed generations of “painters” ironically restaging the tropes of modernism as a farce, Müller shows us the limits of this approach. These artists very practices remain embedded in, in fact *depend on*, the heroic modernist myth as a counterpoint: They

can't resist seeing painting as part of a doomed teleological manhood. And here what is most remarkable about Müller's show becomes apparent. With her careful use of cliché, Müller pushes us to relinquish our gendered conception of painting altogether, to see modernist form as something that has always been bound to libidinal constellations still open for painterly negotiation. Müller gives us the painting we deserve, but the joke's not on painting—it's on us.

The acrylic-on-paper drawings led to the show's second, larger room, where we find three more rugs: The first and second featured the cat alone, while the third is a field of triangles with a knotted version of Müller's painterly signature. The room also contains three large oil-on-canvas paintings from 2015. For these, Müller actually *has* used the drawings from the previous room as studies: Each of the canvases is based either directly (as in the case of the floral *Große Blume* [Large Flower] and the hard-edge *Béla*) or indirectly (as with the monochrome *Mimi*) on those acrylic-on-paper works. Here, Müller comes to the logical terminus of the trajectory she has established over the past few years (if not in the preceding rooms of the exhibition), reaching a position that no longer keeps a distance from oil and canvas but embodies it completely. But she does so having already demonstrated the relationship between modernist form and our gendered terms of perception, breaking open, but not overtaking, firmly institutionalized narratives of art. The painted or drawn line traces the historical and contemporary marks of an unconscious—one that is not only subjective but also social in structure; one that is fatefully reindividuated in Müller's sexed expressions.

“The old expressions are with us always and there are always others” is on view through February 21; “Always, Always, Others: Non-Classical Forays into Modernism” is on view through May 8.

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