

# “There Is Something Odd...” at Christine König Galerie

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The haunting images of Cathrin Hoffmann, Laurent Proux, and Pieter Schoolwerth address the mysteries of the human body in the digital age by confronting us with a sheer opulence of strangeness. What conjugates all of these works is their high level of intensity: Not only large-scale formats, unusual distortions, and bold colors, but also the curatorial concept of painting the walls in matching tones seeks to produce a stylized yet affective experience. Looking at this exhibition thus resembles the disorienting state of just having woken up from a confusing dream – with a racing heart and a stale taste on the tongue.

The skin-colored creatures that inhabit Cathrin Hoffmann’s paintings pose like technoid dominatrixes in excessive contortions. The forms are exactly executed, with hard edges and perfectly laid-out shading. Pastose pimples grow out of the smooth skin and counter the bodies’ sleekness with abject materiality. In *Tertium Non Datur* (2024), the torso of a red, alienlike figure corkscrews upwards, with stone-hard nipples protruding from the top of its chest. A long, needlelike fingernail of an exaltedly spread hand pierces through a hole in a stone-like platform, while another balances a tiny drop. The monochromatic background shows a ghostly shadow that doesn’t fit the figure that casts it exactly, but seems to have a spooky, doppelgänger-ish life of its own. This play with doubling and mirroring repeats itself elsewhere in the room: The wood sculpture *Hallucinating About How We Were* (2022), a flat body with its long limbs and neck provocatively lolling about, casts confusing – painted – shadows on the walls to its left and right, bathing the whole front gallery space in a dark atmosphere.



Cathrin Hoffmann, *Tertium Non Datur*, 2024, oil on canvas, 220 x 160 cm. Courtesy: the artist, Public Gallery, London, and Christine König Galerie, Vienna



Cathrin Hoffmann, *Accumulation*, 2024, oil on canvas, 100 x 80 cm

In contrast, Proux's introspective figures, realized with gestural brushstrokes, are illuminated by a warm, dusky, baroque light, setting a fantastical or even supernatural stage for his enigmatic body constellations. In *Purple haze* (2023), we see a figure lying facedown on the floor, her head stood over by a labyrinth of giant feet and lower legs, while another woman caresses her head. The neon-orange light touching the bodies adds a surreal gloss to the already opaque scenery. At the center of *Under the Tree / (Homage to J.K. Huysmans)* (2023), a person depicted from behind bends over, surrounded by

paradisiacal nature, while further naked bodies entangle in and around a tree. They form a strictly composed, trinity-like maze of fragmented flesh that, despite its naturalism, has something ornamental to it, which mystifies its reading: Is this a scene of desire, or of battle?



Laurent Proux, *Purple haze*, 2023, oil on canvas, 200 x 180 cm. Courtesy: the artist, Semiose, and Christine König Galerie, Vienna



Laurent Proux, *Under the Tree (Homage to J.K. Huysmans)*, 2023, oil on canvas, 220 x 182 cm

Pieter Schoolwerth's eclectic works, on the contrary, are pretty straightforward to read: Two paintings and a video show a world descending into madness. His grotesque, freak-fair-like scenes are filled with icons of US pop culture, including the (Canadian) hip-hop star Drake, a Cadillac, a Ken-doll-like guy without genitals, and one of the right-wingers who stormed the US Capitol in 2021. In *The Opposite of Tweet (Rigged #32)* (2022), a woman in high heels on a Christmas sleigh floats around a nirvanic space with a clownfish-shaped baseball, a huge Nike sneaker that includes parts of a frog's face, and

overgrow neon germs. The interior *The Suit (Rigged #1)* (2021) depicts figures with deformed, Bacon-like heads, their bodies partly executed in pastose, monochrome gestures like painted prostheses. Schoolwerth buys digital assets and edits them in CGI-animation software. Unlike Proux and Hoffmann, though, he doesn't use digital programs only as a step before actually painting, but applies the brushstroke right onto printouts of virtual images. Here, painting appears like just another surface fetish, another mask or filter to model an alienated body.



Pieter Schoolwerth, *The Opposite of Tweet (Rigged #32)*, 2022, oil, acrylic, inkjet on canvas, 148.5 x 151 cm. Courtesy: the artist, Captain Petzel, Berlin, and Christine König Galerie, Vienna



Pieter Schoolwerth, *The Suit (Rigged #1)*, 2021, oil, acrylic, inkjet on canvas, 190.5 x 147.5 x 3.5 cm. Courtesy: the artist, Kraupa-Tuskany Zeidler, Berlin, and Christine König Galerie, Vienna

Looking at this show, figuration could be understood in the sense of “figuring out” disparate experiences, but also as giving the uncanny a “figure,” by finding images for the dreamlike or rather nightmarish gaps between analogue and digital life, between artificial

modification and factual flesh that are at once familiar and unknown. That, in times of virtual reality and all-encompassing mechanization, it is the good old painting brush, of all things, that the artists choose for this endeavor could seem anachronistic. To the contrary, though, the recent hype of figurative painting shows how suitable the medium is, not only to tackling questions around representation, but also to capturing the blurring of reality and fiction, that our bodies and minds have to deal with. It is the tension between the large images' evocative fabrications and the visceral materiality of human touch that enables both immersion in and critical reflection on what it means to feel alive in an evermore virtual world. It might come down to embracing the sheer opulence of strangeness.

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