

# TEXTE ZUR KUNST

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## Anti- Antisemitismus

## DIRTY JOKES, TRUE LIES

Kristian Vistrup Madsen on Sophie Reinhold at Contemporary Fine Arts, Berlin



Sophie Reinhold, "Mann mit Wurst," 2020

We're presented with a game of viewing habits, symbols, associations, and hasty evaluations determined by market-oriented exploitation logics that shape our everyday life and our perception of art. And who, at least in the German-speaking art world, isn't reminded of all those male artists (who have also been generously discussed in this magazine) when it comes to humor, or more precisely, to irony in painting? With Sophie Reinhold's works, this irony serves to show us authority as precedence without past: emerged not from the fogs of classical antiquity, or ancient scriptures, but through flat symbolic accumulation, stripped of ambiguity.

Falling into Reinhold's painterly sprawl, as the exhibition's title warns, "can cost you your life" – even if only in a philosophical sense. You lose yourself, and things and beings become other than what you thought they were: an egg man; a sausage on horse legs; or a mesmerizing ram, like an ur-mother who carries all the wisdom of the world in her eyes. Reinhold is of a generation more comfortable than the one preceding it with embodying the artist-as-subject, and even in revelling in that position. There's so much joy taken in these paintings, and consequently, what they ask of the viewer is not criticality so much as indulgence.



"Sophie Reinhold: *Das kann das Leben kosten*," Contemporary Fine Arts, Berlin, 2020, installation view

But such abundance presents us with two problems: one of coherence and one of clutter. That is to say, the moderately sized rooms at Contemporary Fine Arts were somewhat overwhelmed by the many visual references and intensely rich surfaces of Reinhold's assembled paintings. Both were issues of adding up the sum of vastly different parts – cartoon figures, landscapes, typography, architecture. You might easily have refused and concluded that it was too much to take on. But then the paintings were just so engrossing, quite simply so well done, I, for one, couldn't help but want to. In tackling this Hydra of an exhibition, it is useful to understand Reinhold's work as an exercise in cosmology, in narrative, and as such, that we read the exhibition like literature, work by work, scene by scene. This is the solution to clutter: not to sneak-peak ahead.

What Reinhold does is not render, but digest. She makes such a tight-masked filter for the world that all subjects and styles that pass through her, however wildly they might differ, in the end appear to have hailed from the same closed ecosystem. The orchids of *Wilde Orchideen* (2020), then, grow exclusively on the Island of Reinhold, which, you get the feeling, is both

familiar and strange, in this moment, and in some other time entirely. One reason for this is her mixing of marble powder into pigments, lending the paintings a fractured, hard surface, almost like frescoes, survivors of the ages. Another is her peak painting skills aided by a dark sense of humor and somewhat freaky imagination. Could the answer to the problem of coherence be the artist herself?

As a consequence, the works are adjective-repellant. It is tempting, for instance, to apply a concept like "feminine," not just to the flowers and pastel colors, but also in order to name a certain openness, a lack of aggression. But spend time with them, and aggression rears its head in roundabout ways, communicated by the stubborn incongruity between and within the works. And what seems like openness – say, to interpretation – is more like an insistence on intricacy and versatility. So "feminine," sure, but only to show that such collective descriptors were inadequate to begin with.

In the almost two-by-three-meter-large painting *Courtroom* (2020), a classical architecture of pedimented doorways and checkered floors outlines the first in a series of encounters with authority. The central perspective and the

symbolically loaded motif recalls all the power of ancient civilization and European history. But there are cracks in the marble, and a little graffiti-like ghost is visible through a slit in the wall. As intricately painted faces fading in and out of view, the picture disintegrates before our eyes to ask a question about what it even is, and what else might still be trapped under its surface. What we see in Courtroom is both a ruin and a mirage of something that was perhaps only ever an idea. Narrative in Reinhold's work, it seems, is not teleologically progressive, or spatially expansive, but layered and thick.

Authority appears again in the guise of a police officer about to frisk a long-legged woman in *I know I have the right to remain silent, but I want you to know I am a screamer* (2020). Retro-kitsch sexism run through the Reinhold filter means both making the dirty joke and laughing at its premise. A couple of pictures over, *Mann mit Wurst* (2020) shows a similar landscape of blue, green, and grey, this time with a suited man racing off toward the horizon on a sausage run amok. The two make up an absurd interlude liberated from the constraints of propriety precisely by their stylistically loose but nonetheless inherent connection to Reinhold's overall project. Where in Courtroom law and order was a fading metaphysical fantasy, here it is a farce, which, dressed in Reinhold's marble dust, and even in all its ridiculousness, looks just as time-honored and true as the former.

The cop work serves as a narrative primer for a wall of three paintings that come down on the exhibition like whips. (Talk about aggression.) BSR, POLI, and BVG (all 2019) crop the well-known graphic identities of Berlin's waste management company, police force, and public transport agency, respectively. As if in head-to-toe latex fetish

gear, you feel compelled to violate their perfect, crack-free marble façades to free the orchids and strange animals that Reinhold's paintings have taught us must be cowering underneath. These pictures show us authority as precedence without past: emerged not from the fogs of classical antiquity, or ancient scriptures, but through flat symbolic accumulation, stripped of ambiguity.

Though not quite as aesthetically disruptive, *Das kann das Leben Kosten* and *Gewöhne dich nicht daran* (both 2020) also break with Reinhold's pleasing visuals by introducing typography. The works' painted slogans are lifted from GDR propaganda posters, but what might originally have been well-meaning injunctions to drive safely or not get addicted to prescription drugs here sound ominous, almost threatening, when divested of context. As the past can devolve into "pastness" – as in the mythical and open spaces of the courtroom, ram, and orchid pictures – so expressions of authority become hazy and frayed at the edges once their source withers – as in the case of the GDR, a whole nation. A monkey rests on the tip of the word "KANN" like on the remnants of a crumbling temple, while a single tit is almost visible next to "LEBEN" – or maybe it was there even before, and is instead becoming visible once again? Pastness is an effect of something having been turned into an image, something usually flatter and more static than it was before. But in these paintings, time passes and life sprouts, manically, uncontrollably. Images lie, but from that lie a truth trickles down. The better the lie, the more truth. Sophie Reinhold is very good at lying.

"Sophie Reinhold: *Das kann das Leben kosten*,"  
Contemporary Fine Arts, Berlin, May 20–June 20, 2020.