

FRIEDRICH KUNATH

The "Sensitive Euro Man": Friedrich Kunath Heads Back to Germany to Showcase New Body of Work

KÖNIG GALERIE // August 15, 2020 - October 18, 2020

August 12, 2020 | in Painting



For those of us able to keep track, there are still a few more weeks of Summer, but the Autumn season of gallery openings is approaching with the last warm winds. For fans of [Friedrich Kunath](#)'s work, these days are especially exciting as the artist recently flew from his home in LA for the install and the opening of his debut show at Berlin's [KÖNIG GALERIE](#), to be presented alongside a show of Sarah Morris and Alexander Kluge.

With plans to exhibit a collection of previously unseen paintings, as well as an oversized sculpture, [Sensitive Euro Man](#) will mark a major comeback to his homeland after a four year absence, set within the monumental Brutalist building that

formerly hosted St. Agnes church and community center in the hip Kreuzberg area of Berlin. The presentation of his poetic and deeply emotive works inside such imposing space creates an exciting juxtaposition between the German Romanticism that has guided the artist, along with the country's magnetic draw to modernism, progress, and industrialization. At the same time, the exhibition is a link between Kunath's native culture and his adopted California home where so many of his works are set.

If not an adherent to all the tenets of Romanticism, Kunath still quotes this intellectual movement as one of his biggest influences, intrigued by the way it employs irony as a fundamental aesthetic principle. Mixing a wide range of imagery and elements, including landscape painting, illustration, popular culture, as well as the frequent and paramount use of text, the works are filled with paradox, satire, and bawdy humor, providing many ways to appreciate his pictures. Suffusing them is an ingeniously disguised range of emotions, often revealed in clever titles of both the works and the show—*We Used To Have Parties; Same Thing Happened To Me; Cancel Everything; or For The Last Time, Hello.*

This melange of visuals and humor sentiments mimic the emotional intensity of the real world while in direct contrast with the public faces we are often forced to present, Kunath's twist to "German efficiency" as he successfully merges visual cliches with complex, emotional states of mind and body. Behind clever and sometimes kitsch imagery, the works celebrate the most simple gestures of closeness, as seen from a standpoint of an incurably melancholic master.

—*Sasha Bogojev*

NEW YORK

Friedrich Kunath
„One Man's Ceiling is Another Man's Floor“
Blum & Poe
07.11.2018 – 26.01.2019

If David Foster Wallace and Ed Ruscha had a lovechild with a proclivity for German Romanticism, their progeny may have created something like the art of Friedrich Kunath. With his solipsistic incantations etched across lurid sunscapes, Kunath treads the line between hilarity and melancholic isolation with such adroitness that it's hard to decide whether we should laugh or kill ourselves.

Kunath's exhibition „One Man's Ceiling is Another Man's Floor“ presents an emotional outpour that picks up where his bombastic „Frutti di Mare“ show – presented in 2017 at Blum & Poe's Los Angeles outpost – left off. Gone are the mirrored floors, vertically suspended pianos, and tie-dyed tube socks. In their place is a pared-down display of sumptuous oil paintings and delicate bronze works, elegantly arranged across the two stories of a discrete brownstone tucked away amongst the tumult of midtown Manhattan.

The first floor of this exhibition contains an assortment of paintings which combine the bravado of AbEx brushwork with images redolent of *Sehnsucht*, that wearied sense of loneliness in which Kunath and his Germanic antecedents excel. Haptic pleasure is roused while taking in the thick daubs of impasto smothered across the canvases, yet Kunath upends his elevated compositions by graffitiing hackneyed words and symbols into these viscous layers of paints. Scored into the sublime visions are doodlings of pyramids, hearts, ladders, and pizza slices, cheekily juxtaposed with phrases snatched from our grim reality („1-800-Serenity-Now“, „I'm Outta Time“, „Korea“).

One particularly arresting work, *Not Today* (2018), shows a picturesque woodland scene, rendered across

candy-coloured pinks and blues, which serves as a backdrop to a tragicomic imagining that appears to be lifted straight out of *MAD* magazine. Etched in marker over this fully realised oil painting is a sketchy image of a disgruntled old woman peering through her door-jamb, only to come face-to-face with the grim reaper. Next to this casual encounter of death at one's door are the work's titular words, inscribed in Kunath's trademark chicken-scratch penmanship. Whether this remark suggests that the woman is unafraid of death is to question the nature of irreverence itself. Are those who seem not to care those who feel the most? Kunath is a case in point.

Venturing into the realm of classical sculpture with fiendish wit, the exhibition also includes a handful of bronze sculptures set upon classic white-cube style plinths. In *We Aim to Live* (2018) a hyper-realist elephant trudges steadily ahead with its trunk curled around an uprooted tree. But what initially appears to be a wholesome scene of nature's

wonder quickly reveals itself as a cruel joke. As the viewer circles this statuette, a man walking alongside the creature is exposed. He looks up at the elephant with a smile, but suddenly it becomes apparent that his neck is fixed in a noose, suspended from the tree that the animal has taken up as its plaything. Perhaps Kunath is offering us a hopeful message with this morbid fairy tale – that through the absurd we may find a shred of comic relief in death.

Looking towards *Morrissey Lyrics* (2018), an image of an embattled seascape atop which the eponymous words are egregiously airbrushed, Kunath presents the perfect scenario to encapsulate his art. It is the reference to what we know to be full of sorrow, treated with such lazy flippancy, that reveals the meaninglessness, and as such, the sheer hilarity of the game of life. In the words of Jean Paul, one of the great German Romantics, humour is the „inverted sublime“, the self-realisation of our mortality and its ultimate futility.

Ariella Wolens



Friedrich Kunath, *We're Different People Now*, 2018
Oil on canvas, 155 x 124.5 x 5 cm

Photo: Heather Ravenscroft © Friedrich Kunath. Courtesy the artist and Blum & Poe, Los Angeles / New York / Tokyo /

Friedrich Kunath on pushing paint and why he loves the ‘empty promise’ of Los Angeles



I Like it Here, Can I Stay, 2018, by Friedrich Kunath. Courtesy of the artist and Tim Van Laere Gallery, Antwerp

‘There is this sentence in my head on loop: “I want to go home – but I am home,”’ muses Friedrich Kunath during a walkthrough of his first solo exhibition, ‘Where is the Madness that You Promised Me’, at Antwerp’s Tim Van Laere Gallery. Born in East Germany, the artist has been living in Los Angeles for just over a decade. ‘I am constantly between these two points. There is always a question of “homelessness”.’ Having relocated to Los Angeles in 2007, Kunath spent a year driving through his new city, accumulating Americana knick-knacks from thrift stores. ‘[Moving] is such a big change. When you’re in Germany and you paint, it’s something completely different. Now you’re on an empty canvas culturally. Something was bound to happen, I just didn’t know what.’

While the multidisciplinary artist dabbles in painting, sculpture and drawing, he became preoccupied with airbrushing following his move to the West Coast. 'The whole practice of airbrushing was so conceptually-based, that I doubt it was even painting,' says the artist, who was struck by how unburdened LA was by history. 'You literally don't touch the canvas. There's a built-in distance to everything, but that's what I wanted.'



Installation view of 'Where is the Madness that You Promised Me' at Tim Van Laere Gallery, Antwerp. Courtesy of Tim Van Laere Gallery

Kunath recalls being drawn to the Pioneer paintings of America – particularly the Hudson River School and artists Frederick Edwin Church and Thomas Moran. 'I had an obsession with rediscovering *this* America from 200-300 years ago, but expressed through the aesthetic of Venice Beach.' (The German artist quips about forming the LA River School, due to his studio's location.)

After a six-year hiatus from painting, Kunath felt the urge to reconnect with the medium, and began a new body of work last summer, now on view in the Antwerp gallery. 'It was only logical to go to the opposite end of [airbrushing], to not question what painting means in 2018. You learn not to dissect everything. It was very freeing to just push paint around for a couple of months without any direction.'

It's little surprise then that his florid artworks are imbued with a medley of motifs that reference everything from conceptual art to Hollywood kitsch; and popular culture. At Tim Van Laere Gallery, Kunath's Technicolor canvases depict the saint Hieronymus wearing Converse, or a choir of bananas serenading to a landscape that recalls German romanticism, as well as a feel-good helping of sunsets and watercolour washes, often overlay with handwritten text, cartoons and doodles.



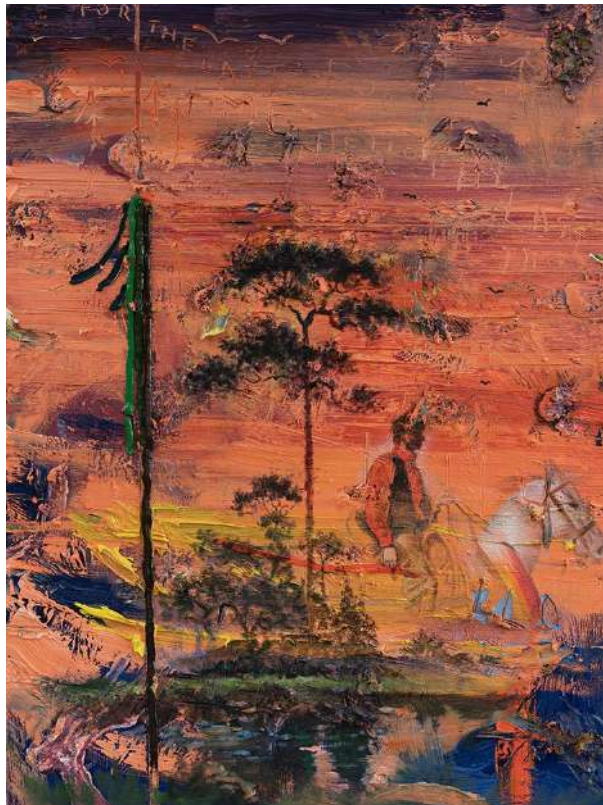
We Must Believe In Spring, by Friedrich Kunath, 2018

A single denim-clad leg emerges curiously from the gallery ceiling, treading a rainbow gradation of 'paint' – the idea for this particular work, Kunath explains, simply came to him in a dream. Other works are more directly autobiographical (Kunath's daughter has contributed scrawls to one painting, for example).

'I feel that it's the very engine of my work, this longing for a place that doesn't exist – it's an empty promise,' he explains. 'LA is an empty promise – I am fully aware of it – but I also love it. I love the stupidity, and I love the substance and the narratives that the city provides.' It's clear Kunath doesn't take his work too seriously – and perhaps in these sober times we're in need of more artists like him.



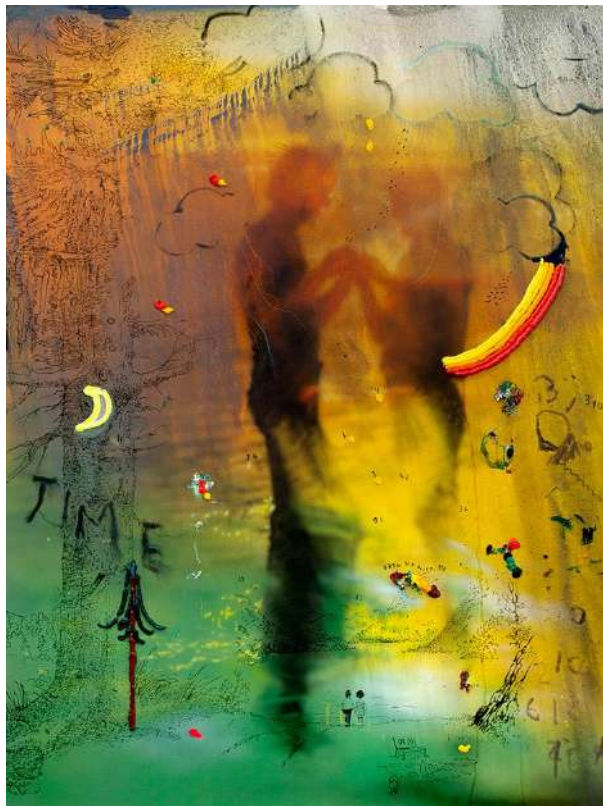
The Last Perfect Day, 2018, by Friedrich Kunath.
Courtesy of the artist and Tim Van Laere Gallery, Antwerp



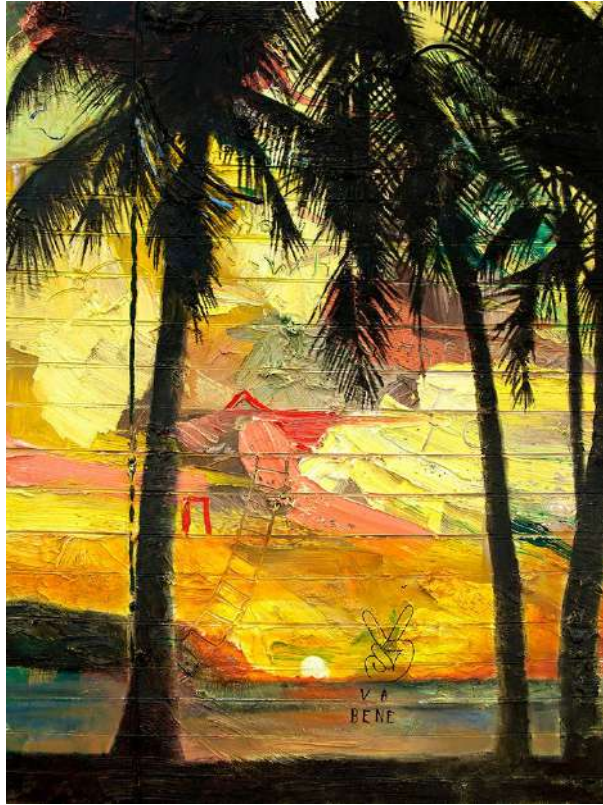
For the Last Time, Hello, 2018, by Friedrich Kunath.
Courtesy of the artist and Tim Van Laere Gallery, Antwerp



PS I Was, 2017-2018, by Friedrich Kunath.
Courtesy of the artist and Tim Van Laere Gallery, Antwerp



Older, 2018, by Friedrich Kunath.
Courtesy of the artist and Tim Van Laere Gallery, Antwerp



Va Bene, 2018, by Friedrich Kunath.
Courtesy of the artist and Tim Van Laere Gallery, Antwerp



Why Not Cry Together., 2017-2018, by Friedrich Kunath.
Courtesy of the artist and Tim Van Laere Gallery, Antwerp

A Promise of Madness: A Conversation with Friedrich Kunath

May 28, 2018 | in Painting



As we [announced previously](#), Friedrich Kunath (one of our favorite artists in *Juxtapoz x Superflat*) opened his latest [solo show with Tim Van Laere Gallery](#) in Antwerp, Belgium on May 17th. *Where is the Madness That You Promised Me* is the LA-based artist's milestone exhibition, as it marks his big comeback to painting after a long period of airbrush based works.

Upon entering the gallery space, the sweet scent of oil embraces one's nostrils as vibrant and textured canvases start their rich and complex narratives. We quickly learned that the artist puts an additional scent to all of his shows, making sure the sensory overload gets that much stronger and more impactful. Created as unmediated, personal journals, the new paintings are heavily layered, both technically and conceptually, holding countless indications of the artist's feelings and observations, portrayed through citations, collages, recycling and references to various sources. Intertwined with quirky sculptural installations that blow up some of the recurring elements to a larger scale, the entire show sucks the observer inside Kunath's universe, allowing you to enjoy the works from multiple perspectives and angles of viewing.



We had the great opportunity to meet with Kunath right before the opening, and hear firsthand about the actual importance of this show for him, as well as learn about both his personal and artistic journey he is currently exploring.

Sasha Bogojev: Where is the title of the show coming from?

Friedrich Kunath: It's from a song by The Magnetic Fields. As you know I always use titles. First of all is unconscious - I just see it and I just know it fits, so it's not something constructive right away. It reveals itself almost always later. There are 2 notions about it that I like - it's a good observation on a relationship that is going on for a long time but there is a moment when it hit a climax. I feel like it holds the truth that I'm interested in but can't explain it. But also it has to do with my practice. Going from airbrushed motifs back into painting again.

Yeah, this one is proper painting show.

You could argue that shoving paint around at the level that I do is a bit more chaotic, but I was looking for some madness in there. Cause with the implied distance of airbrush, at times I felt a bit disconnected. So I was looking for reconnection to painting again. So that was a bit of change in my work.

When did that change take place?

I think last year. I mean, I still do both but it all came when I started coming to America. It was a very conceptual approach as I didn't necessarily feel like painting when I got there. It seemed such a different culture and such a critical move at the time in my life, that I just couldn't continue painting the same I was doing when I was living in Germany. So I looked at a lot of Hudson River School, which was Frederic Edwin Church, Thomas Moore, and the collective that primarily painted landscape scenes and it was pioneer painting was discovering the undiscovered. I could not

have painted it but I was drawn to it, so I decided to take the D-tour through the aesthetic of Venice beach towel. So I decided to spray these images and therefore explain my own distance to this country but also get familiar with it at the same time. So that is where this whole background of sunsets and landscapes started. But then as with everything - you do it too much and you create too much distance. And then I was ready to paint again, something I was suppressing for a lot of years.



Was this the style of painting you were doing back in Germany?

No, being in Germany in the 1990s, going to university, painting the way I do now, you would get shot dead! Stoned to death! Everybody was cooking and doing workshops and performances. Growing up with Kirkeby, Penck, Lüpertz, Baselitz, all these post-war expressionist painters, I never allowed myself into that. But being so far away now in the kind of desert of culture, I'm allowing myself everything. I'm basically free now so that lead me to these new paintings.

I remember reading an interview you did with Hammer museum where you mentioned that when moved to America, the colors got brighter...

..and the topics got darker. Like I was saying - it became a full circle when I arrived at the West Coast. Cause I had my baggage of doubt, the art history, and the burden of art history, or I had that in masses. But I never had all the silliness and stupidity that West Coast culture provides. I think that created a counterpoint that I was desperately looking for. Everything in my work is based on a counterpoint - it's happy, sad, east, west, always contraries of where I'm feeling right at home. It's always that question of homelessness. What does it mean to be home or not. The very sentence "I want to go home but I am home" defines my work very much. There is this energy of homelessness permeating through everything.

Would you consider going back to Germany?

No. I'm done. (laughs) I would prefer not to. I don't think I'd go back east and the only thing more west is Hawaii and I'm ok with that.

Oh yes, I can imagine that. It's an unreal place.

But it's also so spiritual. There is something at play that I never understood in terms of why all these people go there to take the last breaths of their life. So I might move west but not east.



The political situation in the US changed significantly since you moved there. Did you notice that this influenced your work?

Not at all, no. There is one part of me that cares about that, but that person I leave out of the studio. This is something that will never touch me. It will touch me as a person but not my work. It's bullshit and I don't believe in it. It's not my duty to comment on these things. It's like preaching to the choir. There are relevant political artists, and I think when it's their daily practice and complete dedication, there is some value to it. But what am I gonna do? What am I gonna report? What am I

gonna benefit from it other than my vanity? It's completely not my duty. My work is political, absolutely. Cause I react to certain things, but it's not political in the sense that I have to comment on day to day politics. That's naive and stupid.

I've asked cause a lot of artists I've been talking to have been influenced by all these shifts happening.

I mean, what can I do? You can always argue that we're all obviously influenced by it, but unconsciously. But I'm the last person who would make a political statement of the current state of things. Politics is now, art is future. So my comment would be about yesterday. That's the nature of art, you can't dominate it with this bullshit.

Were the paintings in this show done as a whole body of work?

No, not much. I have a lot of work in my studio and once it's clear which direction it goes, I select few groups but giving them too much-controlled thought or conception early on, would ruin everything. Maybe in last 2 weeks of selection, it becomes a bit more clear but I'm the dark pretty much all the time.



And are they in any way connecting to Antwerp?

Yeah, the connection is there. I always thought Belgium is a study in grey. It's also in Belgian art history, it's such an important color. So I painted the walls grey to give it a background, and that's my contribution. Also, being on the black floor, as we've mentioned - the topics get darker. So yeah, I was really investigating some greys.

And in contrast to that, you have a lot of these rainbow-like spectrums. Is there a certain meaning behind those or personal connection?

It goes back to work I did around 2010, back in Germany, I was pressing out tubes on an unprimed canvas, which I called "New Jerusalem", and it had this effect that

the oil of the paint was fading in unbleached canvas. So there is this painting that I always loved where with a gradient of colors. So mostly it is a gradient, and not a rainbow, but also rainbow. So I saw this painting and I wanted to more of that, straight from the tube to give it that 3D effect. Once I did this it created even more depth, here to the flatness of airbrush, and it became a part of my practice. It's so nice, almost like pushing bugger out of your nose.

And then you enlarged it to these sculptural pieces?

Yes, the thought was "you could be IN the painting," so it's even more 3D. So all these are remainings of a painting, and the room could be the painting. But these are really just fun little moments in the studio.



I'm somehow drawn to them so I keep noticing them everywhere in different shape and size.

I've been doing them a lot lately. I like the chroma and I'm really drawn to have childlike quality and naivety.

How much of your work is pre-sketched?

Nothing. I do studies, but normally is this smaller size canvas, and I'm so ADD that every time I'm trying to do it again, it becomes something else. Almost always, for my taste, better. But if I'm trying out something odd, it's more in that range.

And how often do you trash the ones that didn't get anywhere?

No, I don't trash. I work until it's done. I mean, that's a whole other topic - when it's done. But you can always paint over. And the nice thing about oil is that it is BEYOND repairable. Meaning you can repair it at any time. It's like if you betray someone and every time they forgive you.



Ok, and since you've mentioned it, how do you decide when it's done?

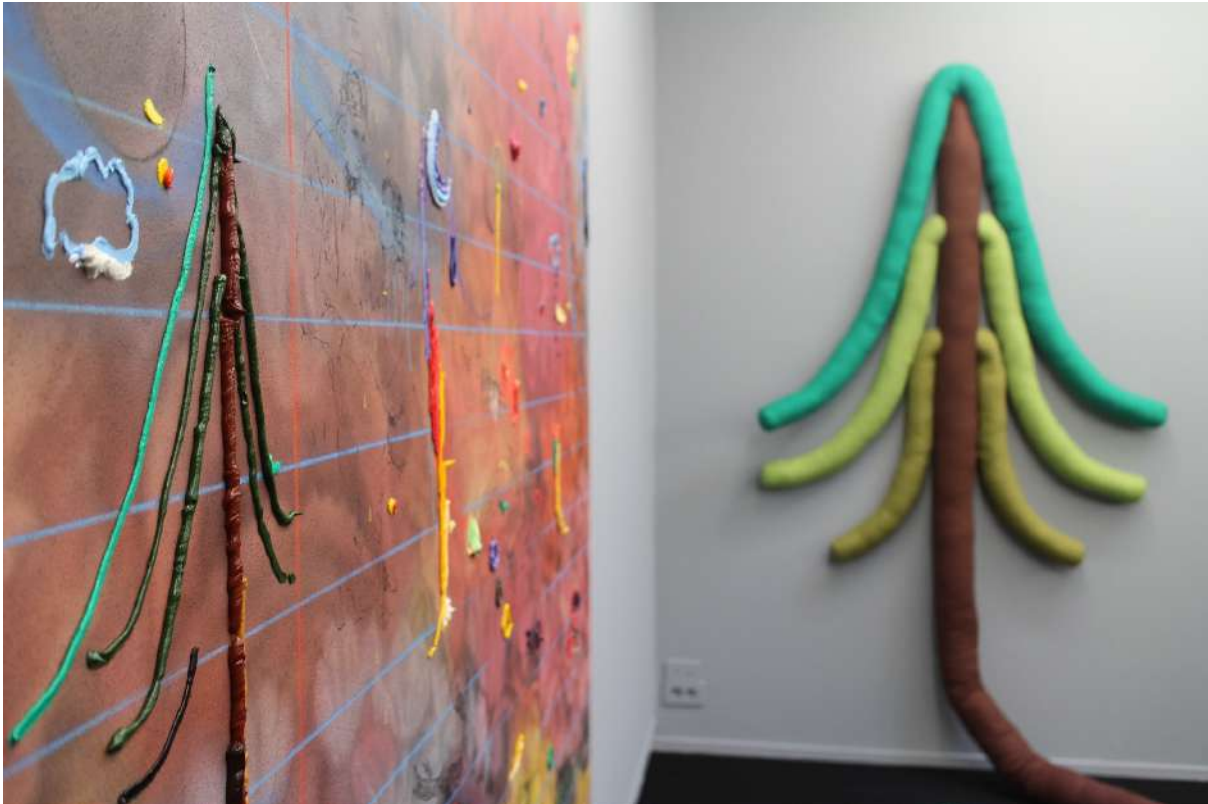
Well, I don't know. They might be not done but they need to leave the studio. There is no mystery really. I mean, they're never really done cause they can do their part right now, in this room, which is beyond my control. They are like children that you send to school - ok, now you go out in the world. And then you have some fuckups and some that great A students. But that's not my job anymore. I'm generally good at letting go. If there is something that I feel touches something that I never experienced, then I keep it.

Do you get attached to work?

Yeah, if they explain something that I didn't know before, and that is inside of me, something very personal, then I won't give it away.

Do you have a favorite piece in this show? Or maybe one that was closest to being kept?

Yeah, that's a better way to ask. There are 2 pieces actually which both have this disconnection that is deeply consoling me. They have this longing that is hard to create, and when you see it, it feels like "Wow! I wasn't really part of this" The best paintings are the ones that you're not really aware of them while you're doing them. They happen when you're a little bit more the observer rather than the one whos making them. And these are always, I feel like, the best in terms that they created themselves, rather than me. Who am I? Like these new ones, I'm doing like really fast scribbles, really unconscious, Tourette drawings. They are both really minimal, there is something empty about them, but there is a lot of details and things that aren't supposed to be together. These are the things I don't fully understand and therefore I think—yeah, that's it! You really try to make meaning with your work, but in the end, you love the ones that don't mean anything.



Where are all these images you're using in your work coming from? How often do you repeat them?

I collect images and in my studio, I have folders with what I call "my actors". So I have a cast. And I have thousands of them. Once a character gets used 3-4 times, it becomes a regular in the cast. In the end is full on movie. So everything comes from music and movies. I use art history, but as a vehicle, but all this is a cast, a neverending story. I freed them from where they were arrested and bring them together, although they shouldn't be together.

Could such approach be a result of the Hollywood influence?

In terms of narrative, probably. I live in the city where global narrative gets manufactured, so I'm very close to that machinery. The idea of telling stories, commercial or not, it doesn't matter. A story is a story. People are writing stories, screenplays, everywhere you go. I think it's a great city to live in. I mean, it's disgusting at times, no question, but I have more in common with these guys than with a banker in Frankfurt.

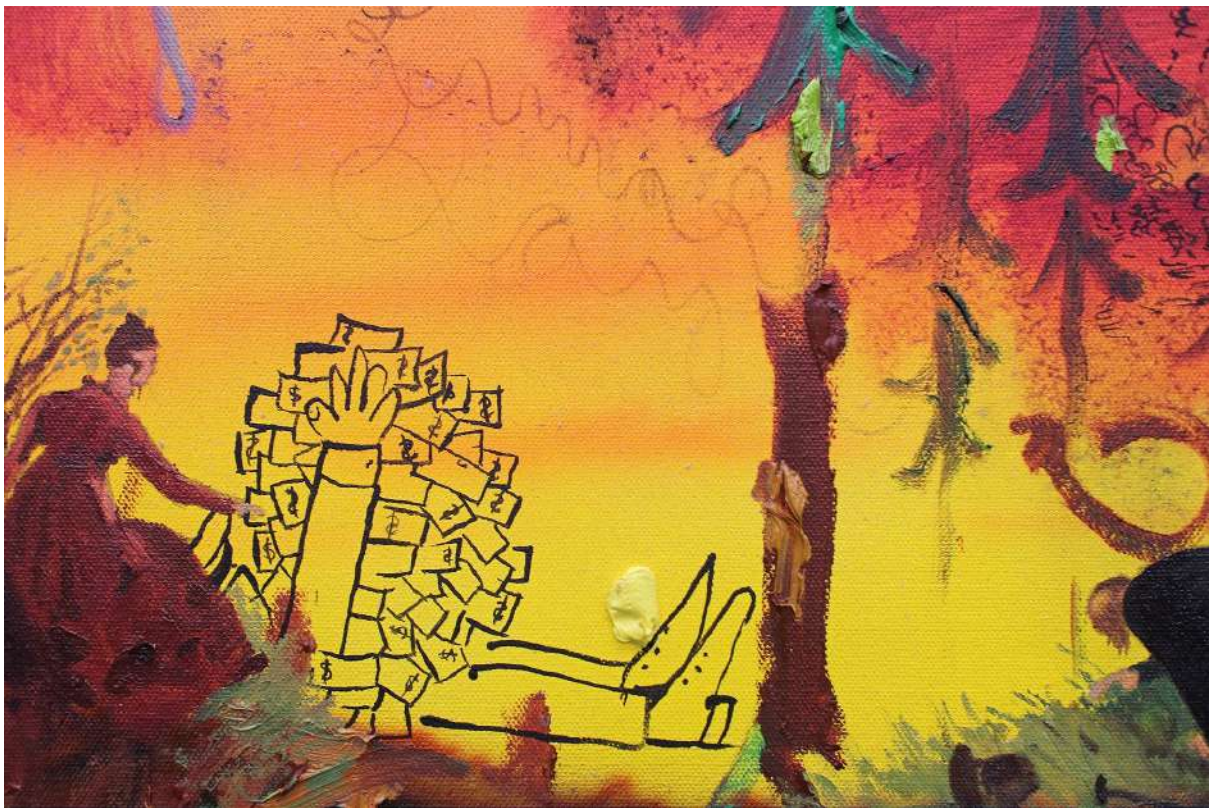
What about these page lines that keep appearing in the works? Where did they come from?

They are an echo of an older work and now they keep appearing as a distant melody. I was doing these notepad works on a canvas, always empty before, with blue and red lines. I started doing these cause I was trying to trick myself into the idea "this is not a canvas, this is just a notepad", so there is this immediate, non-hierarchy of images. You can do anything, total democracy. But it was also playing with the idea that is just a promise, I was being very conscious that is still a canvas. So it had this inbetweenism built in. Then I started doing images on top, and

they became the message behind the notepad lines, something you couldn't see, a letter without words. Something you couldn't articulate into words, but the image can. I was always interested where does language ends and image begin? Where does that inexplorable start? When does the image do the job that words can't do? This threshold I'm very interested in.

So when did you start incorporating text into your work?

Always! That's my absolute fixation to music. I research just music 2-3 hours a day. That's basically what I do. And everything that I know about it goes into the painting. Not into music, cause I can't make music. I tried to write a song but I couldn't do it, so I painted it. I always paint the song. I always thought that's maybe the only thing I can do. Cause what I get from music is so much bigger than what I am, my attempts are just helpless tries to simulate something.



Then I have to ask—what kind of music do you enjoy?

Everything but heavy metal!

Oh, that's pretty precise. Why is heavy metal excluded?

I hate heavy metal. (laughs) I don't listen to it, I don't like the culture. Ok, it's not that I hate it, cause hate would mean that I think it's important. I just don't listen to it. I noticed one day that I listen to pretty much anything, but heavy metal.

Maybe it's because it's quite big in Germany?

Maybe, yeah, but I was never into the anger of it all. I mean there is anger in hip-hop and I love that but is so much better than four long-haired guys screaming over the microphone. It has its place, but I'm not into it. I think it's idiotic.



Inside Friedrich Kunath's Amazing World of Sublime Art, Classic Cars and Obscure Scents

Born in East Berlin but at home in East L.A., painter Friedrich Kunath makes airbrushed canvases layered with strange cartoon figures, blazing sunsets, and deep thoughts. If that sounds a bit lightweight, be careful: His work packs an emotional wallop that will knock you on your ass.

BY ARTY NELSON

PHOTOGRAPHY BY MICHAEL SCHMELLING

November 27, 2017

Friedrich Kunath's odyssey from East Berlin boyhood to international-art-world success could easily span several volumes. But for now, here it is in quick-cut montage, set to the rambling strains of Bob Dylan's "Subterranean Homesick Blues": Kid grows up on the wrong side of the Berlin Wall in an ad hoc hippie-commune-type situation thanks to a rock-manager mother and a roadie stepfather. Then, in 1985, stepdad gets a job in West Berlin, enabling teenage Friedrich to vault the wall a few years before it eventually comes tumbling down. He relocates to Braunschweig, Germany, and in a single day the soundtrack of his life fast-forwards a decade and changes from early-'70s Neil Young to the likes of Joy Division and Erasure. Free at last, young Kunath promptly begins showing telltale signs of juvenile delinquency—skateboarding, boozing, spiraling grades. Following a brief mother-son bonding stint in a folkcrafty "housewives' painting class" and without her son's knowledge, Kunath's mother cobbles together a makeshift portfolio of her son's graphically chaotic abstract paintings and gets him into art school. "I was this 17-year-old kid," Kunath says, "and everybody else was 22 or 23, all listening to Tom Waits, drinking red wine and arguing about *The Threepenny Opera*. I wanted zero part of any of it."



What Kunath did find, however, was an inspiring mentor in artist Walter Dahn, a protégé of Joseph Beuys. “We connected right away. I don’t really know if you can actually teach someone art, but what Dahn did was turn me on to a wide array of ideas and influences. How the music of the Wu-Tang Clan was every bit as valid as the philosophy of Rudolf Steiner. How music had always been the love of my life and how somehow I could articulate that by making art as a kind of shorthand for music.”

One of Kunath’s first attempts, in 1993, was to make a series of portraits inspired by Beck’s hit single “Loser,” which had just taken the airways by storm. Hitting the streets with a handmade sign that said I’M A LOSER, BABY and persuading people to hold it. “I crashed golf clubs, got angry white golfers to hold the sign, went to the train station, whatever I could think of,” Kunath says. “It was about taking something that was out in the world and turning it into something totally specific to my surroundings. It was a first foray into the need to express the language of irony.”



Still partying like a Viking, Kunath next set off on a road trip across the New World with the ambitious plan to skateboard everywhere from San Francisco to Miami. Despite a strong start, Freddy's Big Adventure got derailed halfway through when he fell in love in Austin and promptly got hitched along the Rio Grande in a town called Eagle Pass. The newlyweds soon conspired to head to San Diego, where, after being shunned by the cliquish white surfer kids, Kunath spent a *Breaking Bad*-adjacent year hanging out with vatos until his survival instincts kicked in, sending him packing back to Berlin. Along the way, Kunath had always been making art, mostly sparse black-and-white squiggly-line drawings rife with musical references. In his own eyes, it hardly qualified as a career. Instead, back in Berlin, he and some old friends started an underground nightclub called Finks, popular with the city's burgeoning art-kid set. It was a success, but the demands of the trade were relentless, and soon Kunath went careening into the booze ward, where he was promptly informed that if he didn't put the cork in the bottle, his infected pancreas would kill him in three weeks. Says Kunath: "It was the one and only A.A. I ever needed."

Then, at that very moment, locked in a Mexican standoff with his mortality, Kunath got a call from Jorn Botnagel of BQ Gallery, then based in Cologne, who told the artist that he'd landed a spot in the coveted "Statements" section of 2003's Art Basel fair. "I definitely had the sense of it being now or never," Kunath says. "Like, shit, man, I gotta embrace my fate, invite my symptoms and make them into something. I was living in a tiny apartment above a honey factory at the time. I'll never forget the smell. I made this painting of a door that said IF YOU LEAVE ME—CAN I COME TOO? It was like I painted a way to get out of my situation and get on with life."



Kunath's studio in an old tile factory offers an indoor-outdoor mix of workspaces, including an airbrush room and a gallery-like cube for hang-testing work.



For “Statements,” Kunath intended to make a grand one. Working feverishly, he filled the entire booth with work, including a seven-minute film titled *Going to Quauhnahuac*. The film—a two-hander, with Kunath sharing lead duties with an albino gorilla—feels equal parts *Jackass* outtake and “lonely floating bag video” from *American Beauty*. It caught the eye of the gallerist Jeff Poe, of L.A.’s Blum & Poe—now a global player with satellites in N.Y.C. and Tokyo but at the time still more of a scrappy upstart. “Back then, the art world was a smaller place and ‘Statements’ was massively important,” Poe says. “Absolutely where you’d go to get the ‘finds’ being shown by respected galleries from all over the world. The doors didn’t open to the public until 11 A.M., so I’d sneak up at nine, when I wouldn’t have to talk to anybody. Luckily, BQ had left Freddy’s video running all night. I watched the video. Then I watched it again. Maybe five times in a row total. There were paintings and drawings, and they all had the same strange emotion as the film. Melancholic, sad, and funny. This *music* flowed out from all the work, creating a sense of homesickness—that deep ache that just wells up and emanates from your chest. Immediately, I knew I had to do a show with this guy.”

“Basically, this is how it works,” Kunath says. “I put the Tennis Channel on mute, turn on some music, and I head over here.” He motions to several tables piled with images clipped from a slew of sources that have been informing the mix of big paintings, installations, and objects that will, in just a couple of days, make up *Frutti di Mare*, a new solo show at Blum & Poe Los Angeles. “Once an image is used, it becomes an ‘actor’ in my imaginary cast. After two or three paintings, they get their own folder. I sort of try them out in things. It can be a very long process of projecting and taking away. Often it’s very nonsensical—you don’t want it to make too much sense too early.”



Lounging in his East L.A. studio in a paint-spattered white oxford shirt and pair of khakis, the artist looks like one of Owen Wilson's binge buddies in *The Royal Tenenbaums*. The studio sits along a corridor in El Sereno, a kind of gasoline alley that in recent years has become home to more than a few artists' studios. Kunath's spot comprises a cluster of spaces within a single box. Half of it looks how you'd expect: a high-ceilinged central work area, a small kitchenette, a “spray” room for airbrush work, and a “white cube” where art can be installed to beta-test how it holds up in a more formal, presentational setting. The austerity of this side of the studio is only slightly betrayed by a pristine vintage British-racing-green bubble-top Jaguar parked in the middle of it.

Here's just a fraction of what's at play in the work that's in process on these walls: searing sunsets mutated from bad gas-station postcards into MoMA- and Tate-caliber goodies; cartoon misanthropes wandering pop-totem-littered landscapes; tie-dyed socks stacked like soft Carl Andre blocks; a baby-grand piano with its legs sawed off mounted on the wall, looking ready to face off against one of Richard Prince's car-hood sculptures. When one moves through the work, one's senses vacillate from the comic to the bittersweet to the absurd—with measured forays into the deeper waters of the air-conditioned anxiety dream that constitutes much of contemporary American life.



Kunath isn't just a scent collector—he actually wears the stuff. These shelves hold a mix of high- and lowbrow commercial scents, as well as a few he's developed himself.

You'd be hard-pressed to find an artist working today with a more varied visual arsenal. A big part of this, Kunath claims, is that the origins of his now big-time

artistic practice evolved because he can't draw for shit. “At art school, there were clearly others who had more ‘art talent,’ ” Kunath says. “Looking back, I feel bad for those people. Everyone was telling them they were geniuses because they had these amazing hands and could really draw anything perfectly. I never drew growing up, so for me it became about identifying this deep, weird appreciation for music, this consoling quality, and figuring out some way to convert that into a visual language. Meanwhile, all the ‘geniuses’ had already dropped out after three weeks because they were like, what's the point?”

Continuing through Studio Kunath, we slip through a narrow door behind the kitchen area, entering the more mysterious yin to the primary region's workspace yang. What we find is the jet-set shag pad of any young man's dreams, exquisitely adorned with midcentury accents. A living room with one of those sectional couches that resemble a chunk from a crossword puzzle. Another hangout room, a bedroom for midday naps and the occasional late night, then an office anchored by a vast desk. “This is really where most of my actual ‘work’ gets done,” Kunath says with a grin. Across from the desk is a high set of stuffed shelves. The bottom tier is reserved for an impressive phalanx of cologne and perfume bottles.



Kunath's life feeds into and even, at times, blurs with his work. Always present is a slight tension between the work's lovelorn emotional content and the artist's dead-eye take on the good life in the West: classic cars, vintage watches, clubby sports like tennis. Kunath's doppelgänger protagonists never ultimately seem satisfied by the dreams promised by these contemporary talismans of winning. Maybe it goes back to gallerist Jeff Poe's notion of the artist's peculiar ailment: the homesickness. That despite having successfully ollied over the Berlin Wall—and

nattily dressed as he is—Kunath remains forever a lost and lonesome traveler in search of a home that literally no longer exists on the map.

When asked about his taste for certain luxury items, many of which pop up time and time again in his work, the artist gently dismisses their magical properties or deeper significance. “When I could finally buy a watch,” Kunath says, sporting a sexy early-'70s Rolex Root Beer GMT-Master, “what was I going to do, get a Seiko?” After one of his first shows, Kunath took \$3,000 and bought himself a Jaguar XJ40. His gallerist at BQ wasn't impressed. “Jorn wouldn't speak to me for a week,” Kunath says. “I mean, a Prius would've cost nearly ten times as much, but the point was that I wasn't behaving the way an artist in Europe was supposed to behave. Which probably speaks quite a lot to why I live here now. In L.A., nobody really cares. All those old rules go out the window.”



The most intriguing of Kunath's cultivated obsessions is his love of scents, which he regards as “invisible sculptures,” the passion dating from the artist's childhood, when he'd dose his pillow with perfume to liven up his universe. A few years back, Kunath began working with a Swiss perfumer, Yann Vasnier of Givaudan, to develop his own juice, which he intended to name Distance, though now he's also debating Fuck it, I Love You as well as I Don't Worry Anymore. So far, and despite a growing shelf of samples, a final product has yet to emerge, though the artist remains steadfast. For *Frutti di Mare*, his fall show at Blum & Poe's L.A. venue, Kunath sprinkled the rooms with Montale Eau de Parfum from Paris, a surly and slightly tart concoction boasting strains of patchouli, resin, frankincense, and labdanum. “The last thing I do with every show is walk through and decide the appropriate scent,” Kunath says. “It's the finishing touch.” Given that smell is the undisputed heavyweight champ of the senses, it's hard to overstate how powerfully the aroma of the gallery impacts the experience of the show—the effect that a great score has on a film is a decent analogy.

“The last thing I do with every show is walk through and decide the appropriate scent. It's the finishing touch.”

Kunath had his debut solo exhibition with Blum & Poe in the spring of 2004, while living in Cologne. “From that first show, it was very clear that literally, figuratively, psychologically, and emotionally, Friedrich had one foot in each culture and

continent,” says Tim Blum, the other half of Blum & Poe's founding duo. “One room had these dark, gothic, almost hermetically sealed concept works. The other had a massive explosion of color.”

Four solo shows and 13 years later, the connection between Kunath and the gallery is stronger than ever. Kunath seems born for Blum & Poe's roster, which is inclined toward smart, elegant art, ballasted by certain DIY textures, forged by practitioners raised on a steady diet of Black Flag and the early novels of Bret Easton Ellis. “L.A. was almost like a prophecy for Freddy,” says Jeff Poe. “His mind-set is sunny, as opposed to a lot of German art from the '70s and '80s, which was very weighed down by the history. And doubting. Freddy's part of a newer breed who've shed a lot of that fraught lineage.”



It was in 2007 that Kunath's L.A. prophecy finally became reality. The artist and his second wife, Maggie, packed their bags and made the move from Germany. Upon arriving in Los Angeles, the pair hopped in a car, cranked the tunes, and went in search of Carole King's mythical house in Laurel Canyon.

On another cannonball run through pre-hipster Highland Park, the Kunaths came upon a dilapidated house. Hopping the fence to further inspect, they quickly called dibs on the crumbling den. “We tracked down the landlord and he was like, ‘Huh?’ ”



At Blum & Poe Los Angeles, before the opening of his fall show, Kunath loads up a palette and freestyles a last-minute touch to the edge of a huge painting.

Still settling in and suffering from the upheaval, Kunath found it impossible to make art. He now says his first attempts were akin to painting with a brush in the wrong hand. So instead he and Maggie began combing the city's endless thrift stores, amassing a vast array of tchotchkes and Americana. It was in those dusty aisles of abandoned dreams that Kunath's conversion took place. "I was just sort of waiting," he says. "Being clueless sometimes helps. You can't penetrate the work with all your wanting and desperation. And what I soon discovered was that I'd left all my backpacks of burdens back in Germany. In L.A., there was no art history, only tar pits and Disney and maybe some Ed Ruscha. I could just breathe and figure it out." Though the artist's assessment of L.A.'s cultural history might be just a wee bit of an over-simplification, his point stands: L.A. is exactly what he needed to liberate himself from the weighty art-historical burden his European roots carried.

One key element that the city added to Kunath's art-making was the opportunity to collaborate with L.A. printmaker and silk-screener Richard Duardo. Up till then, Kunath's paintings consisted mostly of line drawings over "marinated" canvases, soaked in color. After he enlisted Duardo, the artist's practice opened up. "What better way to deal with a city than by working with people of that city?" Kunath says. "And projecting images onto canvas felt ever truer to a city whose identity is so much derived from the projected image." Kunath began printing and tracing images onto his work, often repeating elements like loafers and tennis rackets across different paintings. Suddenly, his repertoire of visual iconography was expanding.

In recent years, Kunath has garnered much acclaim for his sunset paintings: slick airbrushed canvases sometimes hosting a splash of text or maybe featuring a bored

shipwrecked-looking guy with his head in his hands. “Sunsets are a such problematic image, which is part of what drew me to them,” Kunath says. “They're so empty. Sunsets and rainbows. They're the saxophone solos of art. It allows me the opportunity to make them full again. To find a way past the irony and have them become a sincere statement.”



Left : Leaving the studio on the day of his Blum & Poe opening, painting in tow.

Right : Kunath's most quintessentially Kunath tattoo (not pictured) is of a sad tennis player.

“The whole city stank of art history and death. What could I possibly do that hadn't already been done a thousand times?”

The title of the catalog for Kunath's 2013 Modern Art Oxford show in England was *In My Room*—a reference to the lonesome Beach Boys song of the same name (*There's a world where I can go and tell my secrets to, in my room*)—and there's a distinct “dude looking back” quality to some of his work. Which poses a challenge: How do you mine the past without getting mired in sentimentality or nostalgia? “The melancholy Freddy infuses the work with imbues it with a sense of maturity,” says Jeff Poe. “When you're young and totally messed up, that distance doesn't exist. You're just tortured, and that's it.” Without a doubt, Kunath's power to digest and process the twists and turns of his very unusual life brings a different flavor to the somewhat threadbare “Go west, young man” trope. When Kunath glances over his shoulder, the life he sees is one that Jack Kerouac or Brian Wilson could hardly have fathomed.

Reflecting on his process, Kunath grins, thinking back to a time in 2005 when he was awarded a prestigious artist-in-residence grant at the Palazzo Barbarigo della Terrazza in Venice, Italy. “I got there and, literally after three hours, had to leave,” Kunath says. “It all felt so cliché. The whole city stank of art history and death. What could I possibly do that hadn't already been done a thousand times? In that regard, Los Angeles has been the complete opposite for me.” Though easy to dismiss as the words of a brazen young iconoclast—and maybe they are that, too—the truth is, Kunath abandoned every traditional path to art-world success he ever stumbled upon, instead taking out the proverbial machete and hacking his own way.

“The thing about me is that every piece of art I make comes from something other than me—an image, a toy, a song,” Kunath says. “I never make art entirely from within myself. I look for outside things that are a kind of projection of me, or that convey an emotion that I connect with. Then I alter-slash-interpret them and release them back out into the world for people to engage with. To make a painting just out of my own personal headspace is uninteresting. I think that's part of what's always connected me so much to music—the way a song can participate in so many people's lives and cultures. In that way, I'm screwed. I always need the others.”

Arty Nelson is an art, food, and television writer living in Los Angeles.

This story appears in the holiday 2017 issue of GQ Style with the title “Friedrich Kunath’s East Angeleno Homesick Blues.”



Friedrich Kunath Plays With Scent, Sense, and Sentiment

Friedrich Kunath's latest exhibition is fragrant with nostalgia, melancholy, and whimsy.

by Jennifer Remenchik
October 4, 2017



Installation view, *Friedrich Kunath, Frutti di Mare* (2017),
Blum & Poe Los Angeles (photo by the author for Hyperallergic)

A melancholic melody draws me closer to a film, and I take a seat on a bright orange couch that looks like it was made in the '70s. It's the kind of couch that would fit perfectly into the set design of *Valley of the Dolls*, which feels like a good starting point for the general aesthetic of Friedrich Kunath's *Frutti Di Mare* at Blum & Poe in Los Angeles. Explosive psychedelic moments combine with unhinged desire to convey the potential for excitement, pleasure and doom ahead, like all good romance novels should.

I make myself comfortable on the couch and watch the opening scene. An older man walks down a set of train tracks while the title text reads "The End is My Beginning." The character is an artist, and I quickly get the sense that he is perhaps a projection, an older version of whom the actual artist, Friedrich Kunath, imagines himself to be. The film takes on classically romantic themes through a seemingly fruitless search for eros and an ominous acknowledgement of mortality, the combination of which displays itself most vividly when the protagonist stares intensely at a Calvin Klein perfume bottle labeled "Eternity."

The exhibition seems to model a kind of love story, with many of the paintings and sculptures also serving as props in the film, as though they were the detritus of its narrative. The work consists of everything from vast mirrored walls to penguin sculptures, and a particularly successful room-sized installation, in which a piece of fabric spread across a bed featured in the film reads "Gee, it's nice to be alone." Clusters of perfume bottles near a painting form a tiny installation, and for reasons I don't quite understand, the artist has chosen to sprinkle the entire first gallery room with brightly colored socks.

The air is filled not only with the soundtrack from the film, but also with a light floral scent, a striking olfactory detail that is indicative of the level of care the exhibition has received. In the press release the artist speaks of the desire "to become one with painting." The main romance here is not so much erotic, as it is the tale of the artist and the art piece, of the creator and the creation. Kunath, like the protagonist of the film, comes across as married to his work.



Friedrich Kunath, "Love Shouldn't Make Sense" (2017),
oil and acrylic on canvas, 72 x 60 x 2 1/4 inches (photo by the author for Hyperallergic)

What thankfully keeps this admittedly dated sentiment from dripping over into nostalgia is the general light-heartedness Kunath brings to the space in the form of bright colors, funny cartoons and sincere but silly decisions, such as a couple of television monitors covered in, inexplicably, more brightly colored socks. This mixture of almost painfully sincere gestures with the occasional sporadic, irreverent moment keeps the viewer guessing much like the romantic impulse it depicts. The aphrodisiac effect of the the exhibition's titular seafood works its magic, and I leave satisfied.

Frutti Di Mare continues at Blum & Poe through October 14.



FRIEDRICH KUNATH, *PLEASE DON'T LEAVE ME*, 2017. ACRYLIC AND INK ON CANVAS, 172.7 X 233.7 X 3.8 CM. © FRIEDRICH KUNATH, COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND BLUM & POE, LOS ANGELES/NEW YORK/TOKYO. PHOTO: JOSHUA WHITE/JWPICTURES.COM

How to Turn a Studio into a Rumpus Room into an Exhibition

"I'm in a good place." Friedrich Kunath has had his share of ups and downs, but in a sprawling new exhibition at Blum & Poe the Los Angeles painter lays bare his soul—and a remarkable studio—with a positive attitude and a higher purpose.

By [Michael Slenske](#)

August 28, 2017, 3:21pm

"My think tank's in here," says Friedrich Kunath as he walks me past a Bond-worthy Jaguar E-Type, a rolling sculpture of sorts that anchors the foyer of his sprawling 14,000-square-foot studio in the East Los Angeles neighborhood of El Sereno, and opens a door onto a rumpus room stuffed with mid-century design gems. If the studio (which was formerly owned by Cuban-American artist Jorge Pardo) is the German-born-Los Angeles-based artist's lab—one devoted to a painterly psychedelia that merges abstraction, figuration, and romantic landscape painting—this space mirrors the interior of his mind. "Everything in here," he claims, "gets manifested in the art."

The first thing you notice in Kunath's disco dojo are the British racing green walls, which echo the Jag's paint job and lend a funky, *American Gigolo* vibe to a busy selection of the artist's paintings. The works on display include a pair of canvases emblazoned with the phrases "I'll Try To Be More Romantic" and "Fuck It, I Love You." Next, the incense hits your nose, burning from a wall of record bins filled with old vinyl and

topped with a collection of photos, sculptures, and tchotchkes including personalized tennis balls (a present from his LA gallery, Blum & Poe). A two-way brick fireplace divides this part of the space from a voluminous library and a louche lounge occupied by a porcelain camel, Bertoa chairs, and a vintage wooden bar straight from *Boogie Nights*. Evoking everything from iconic European design to German Romanticism and Hollywood kitsch, Kunath's extraordinary space makes you wonder why so many other artists treat their studios like dumping grounds. "I never understood the studio as purely a workplace. You come here and you do this, and then you go home and only there it's nice? Fuck no, it has to be nice here, too!" exclaims the artist, who will shortly put a version of his cush digs—complete with carpeted and mirrored floors—on display at Blum & Poe as part of his first hometown solo show in five years, transforming the first floor of the Culver City space into a tour of his oeuvre to date. He's even attaching grand pianos to the walls, inside of which he'll project a film, *The End is My Beginning*, in which his Polish father-in-law, an ex-miner, inhabits the *mise en scène* of his paintings.

"I felt like he should play things out contrary to his life—kind of an anti-authenticity program," Kunath explains, noting that the film also explores the "tragicomedy of the clichéd wish to be one with the work." With elements represented in *The End is My Beginning* dispersed throughout the exhibition's paintings, sculptures, and installations, the show is intended to echo the psychological effects of Ad Reinhardt's *Abstract Painting* and Kazimir Malevich's *Black Square*. "Everything I do is a love story," says Kunath. "It just doesn't always end up being very sunny."



FRIEDRICH KUNATH, WE ARE DUE FOR A TRANSCENDENT MOMENT (COSMIC COWBOY), 2016. ACRYLIC AND INK ON CANVAS, 238.8 X 259.1 X 3.8 CM. © FRIEDRICH KUNATH, COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND BLUM & POE, LOS ANGELES/NEW YORK/TOKYO. PHOTO: JOSHUA WHITE/JWPICURES.COM

GARAGE: You seem to be working in a lot of different painterly genres right now, from interior painting to figuration to straight-up abstraction. Where did this show start for you?

Friedrich Kunath: Mainly it was about me getting back to the cliché of it all. To really just, you know, paint.

There are the dreamy allegorical paintings, the romantic landscapes, and the surreal, rainbow-punctuated interiors that have surfaced over the years, and then there are these big, meaty abstractions that feel new. Why do you keep coming back to rainbows?

I've always been drawn to them. When I was in art school, these types of things weren't allowed. They were almost forbidden subjects because they menaced, sort of like soft rock. There will be a couple of them in the show. One is going to say: "Your fault, My fault."

How many paintings are you showing?

Well it's all about editing. There are some based on an Odilon Redon chair design, and there's the "Returned to Forever" series, which is a reference to a 1970s jazz fusion band.

This is sort of the beginning and the end of painting for you.

Yeah, it's quite an existential question: What does it mean to do a show in 2017?

Is it because of the fraught political moment we're in that you're asking yourself this question?

Of course. I don't consider myself a traditional political artist, but in a way we all are now. It all starts personal, then wanders out into the world. I've been through some transformations in my life . . .

What do you mean?

I cleaned up my life a little bit and I'm trying not to be so hard on myself. I'm 42, and I was like, "Fuck, I'm running into the same problems all the time and I've got to do something." Things as simple as being unable to say no. So I'm trying to deal with all these things. Saying yes all the time is just an aspect of inner hate. I don't believe in self-help or self-sufficiency, but I know there's something changing in me. There was a moment that brought it all out, and now I'm in the middle of it.

And this show will see you pushing through that?

Yeah, it's going to be big for me. I don't know what the outcome will be, but this exhibition includes every type of thing I've done over four years. For me at least, it's a big transformative show that'll also define something. I haven't done a solo show at Blum & Poe since 2012. I felt like I wasn't ready.

What's changed? What have you been thinking about?

It's the most complete and kaleidoscopic show I've done. I've done projects in Europe and New York, but they were always in one room. Here I can tell much bigger story. It's like a museum.

It also seems like a total work of art, with everything referencing everything else.

I did a show in Holland last year where I had a whole big room, and it looked like this. But now I'm looking ahead to what the resolution of it all might be. That's in the last room, where I go back to thick paint and figuration. And the video is called *The End is My Beginning*. It's . . . a senseless quest for meaning. You're given purpose, so there's always an interior monologue, but now you have something that bounces off you—the purpose of life. Sometimes I feel like it's all so formalist and decorative. And I'm not saying that I'm going to change, but I want to give the work a bigger purpose. I don't want to do seven abstract paintings in a row and call it a day.

You want to create more questions than answers.

For sure.



FRIEDRICH KUNATH, *YOU'RE ONLY LONELY*, 2016. ACRYLIC AND INK ON CANVAS, 162.6 X 116.8 CM. © FRIEDRICH KUNATH, COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND BLUM & POE, LOS ANGELES/NEW YORK/TOKYO. PHOTO: JOSHUA WHITE/JWPICTURES.COM

Is this show something you could only do in LA?

Well, LA gives me the most freedom of all the places I've lived. There's a sense of generosity here that I've never felt anywhere else.

Where were you living before?

Mostly Europe, Germany. I lived in Texas twenty years ago.

What made you move to LA?

I did a show here, then I was like, "shit, this is my blank canvas." It was a new beginning. I'm from East Berlin, so going from communism to sunshine made things feel easier.

What did your parents do?

My mom was in the music business, managing Eastern European rock bands. But then she transitioned into dealing a bit with art, East German stuff, in galleries. She married four times so I have like a lot of stepdads, from roadie to architect to bricklayer, the whole range. My dad used to be a bricklayer but now he has a company. He does pressure gauges, really boring stuff.

So what got you into painting?

My mother took me to a thing when I was 15 or 16. I was kind of a troubled kid—skateboarding, drugs. She dragged me to this thing where there were housewives painting. I think she offered me money, like if you do this I'll give you an allowance. Then I painted at home and she took my portfolio and applied to the art schools with it when I was 17, and one took me. I think I was the youngest student ever to start there; I don't have a high school diploma. I was like, "Fuck, I'm not an artist. This is insane!" But in retrospect, it saved me. It was all a joke pretty much for the first four years, then it dawned on me that maybe it was the only thing I could do, and it got serious. It's not the classic story of a well-nurtured talent, and I still feel that distance, you know? When you ask an artist they always say that "I feel like an outsider," but I definitely feel that. I wanted to be a musician—there are a lot words in my work, and a sadness and melancholy that music tends to deal with more than art.

I do feel like your paintings have a sort of longing in them.

That might come from music; that's kind of where I learned my alphabet. If what most artists do is articulate certain ideas as objects, what I do, if I can, is articulate certain emotions as objects—or as paintings, films, sculptures, or entire shows. But I also ask the big questions, you know, so it's never like when artists just talk about certain processes. There's no nailing it down.

Where do your obsessions with architecture and interiors come from?

I don't know, but I always feel like a carpet not only changes the acoustics in an exhibition, it also takes away the importance, or the fear of importance. A carpet democratizes everything because it feels like home. I always like to calm things down, make them homey and comfortable.

Is this a conceptual entry point or a formal device?

Maybe a mixture, like a Trojan Horse. Like, "Come in, sit down, let's talk." But maybe it's insecurity too. I've done the white cube, but I feel more comfortable thinking in terms of other interiors.

Many artists have this "overwhelming" sensibility, this excess of ideas that spill out onto the walls and the floor.

I've always needed a space like this in order to think. I hate the economy of things that are "not supposed" to be around you.

It gets at that notion that the best art is art that's about life, not about art.

Always, I totally agree. Most of the stuff I do when I'm painting is unconscious, almost blind. I create an environment to let these things happen. But when they're happening I'm actually not there, really.

It can't feel like you're going to a job to make things for people to buy.

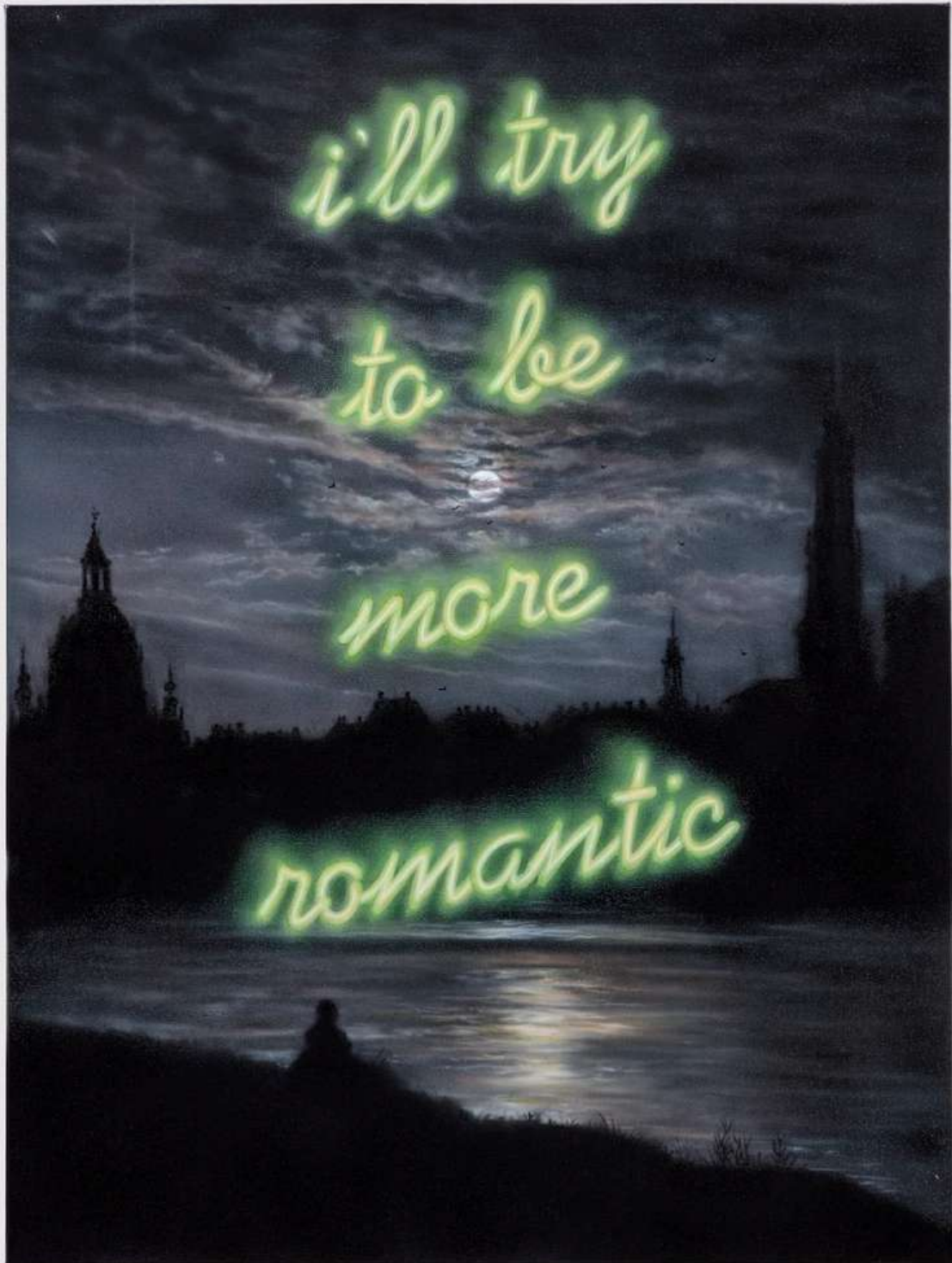
Yeah, or like an exercise. I've always had the fetish of a gentlemen's club in my head. That would be the perfect environment.

Do you have buddies that come over and jam in this room?

Oh yeah, of course, all the time. Not collectors though. It's so sensitive you know? When I'm doing a show, every reaction I get from you, from anyone, towards something unfinished is going to corrupt my view. And I don't want that, so I'm very selective.

What prompted the show's title? I like the melody of the phrase. It also seems like you're really rolling the dice, showing all your cards.

Yes, but if it fails then that's fine. I'm in a good place.



FRIEDRICH KUNATH, I'LL TRY TO BE MORE ROMANTIC (STUDY), 2015. ACRYLIC ON CANVAS, 101.6 X 76.2 X 1.9 CM. © FRIEDRICH KUNATH, COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND BLUM & POE, LOS ANGELES/NEW YORK/TOKYO. PHOTO: JOSHUA WHITE/JWPICTURES.COM

FRIEDRICH KUNATH'S ELEGANT FAILURES

“In My World Everything Is a Projection”

Interview: Timo Feldhaus

Photography: Christian Werner



It is on one of those timeless L.A. late afternoons that we visit the artist Friedrich Kunath in his studio—timeless because the sun set just as gloriously on this day as on each of the 364 other days of the year in this city.

Some beautiful cars are parked in front of a big garage; a couple of them are the artist's. In his roomy studio he has spread out his personal wunderkammer of pop-cultural artifacts across several tables, a selection of objects that mean a lot to him. In the middle of it all is a drum kit. On the walls are finished and almost-finished canvases. Born in 1974 in a small town in what

was then East Germany, Kunath has made it big in L.A. With melancholy humor, his works hold a delicate balance over the chasms of everyday life.

On the day of our visit, there's a warmth and softness in his eyes as he blinks. He is wearing a baseball cap. The painter has recently started getting more into perfume.



Timo Feldhaus
Friedrich Kunath

Why do shoes of various kinds come up in your paintings so often? I've spotted a whole panoply of sneakers, slippers, and loafers in your work.

Age-old, banal symbols of abandonment simply have a fetish effect on me. That's also why there are always, for example, suitcases in my paintings. I'm just stuck with all that, and at some point I realized that it doesn't have to be a problem. It's ok.

What does leaving someone or being left behind have to do with shoes?

You're always leaving, right, and the chances are that you forget something. But you carry on leaving, onward and onward, away. That's why the shoes are often disproportionately large.

You left Germany in 2007, heading for California. Is there a connection between Chemnitz, the small East German town where you were born, and L.A.?

It likely has something to do with projection: the romantic pull of the West. I've always carried it with me, also in the town where I was born, which is known mostly for its low standard of living and high suicide rate. The first time I was in California I was astounded at the scale, the grandeur, the horizon. And the quality of the light. You suddenly notice: there's so much contrast here—contrast, in the literal sense.



Karl Lagerfeld once said that a good idea doesn't just show up when you're lying at the beach, you have to work hard for it.

That makes sense in view of his work ethic, doesn't it?

You're meant to say he's wrong...

Of course I've made a lot of my works at the beach. But I know what he means. Lagerfeld is his own capitalist. He thinks self-exploitation is great, so he exaggerates it and makes a spectacle of it in his own persona. He is anti-romantic, anti-nostalgic, because that's exactly what makes him original within the system of fashion.



In your work you continually play a balancing act with feelings of nostalgia. There's always a little melancholy, but at the same time you open trapdoors, and make it possible to laugh on the inside.

Nostalgia can be very dangerous. I'm living in 2016 after all. And I don't at all want to go back, but forward. In the end nostalgia means memory without the pain, and once you've realized that, there's an amazing technique for dealing with it: irony.

What's your modus operandi? How do you go about making your work?

My painting functions like a diary. At 10 in the morning I come to the studio—well, what else am I supposed to do?

Then you sit down here?

No, I don't really sit much. I switch on lights and music. Three quarters of the time I'm leafing through books. I have my tables here, as you saw. I arrange various pictures on them.

These records, books, magazine clippings are a wunderkammer of your own socialization into pop culture, right?

It's a psychedelic archive. It is a compendium of the things that I was—or still am—totally enthusiastic about. It likely has something to do with immortality, this investigation of eternal youth. Historically, after all, L.A. is the ultimate city for self-invention.



How precisely do you work that into your painting?

For years I haven't really done anything but pushing things to and fro. It's a kind of collage process. When I'm happy with something I haul the collage onto the photocopier and make a kind of layered copy out of maybe eight different sources. For example, a painting by Carl Spitzweg, an ad for Lanvin perfume, and a postcard someone sent me. Then there's sometimes a canvas that I've marinated, two days earlier, with watercolors. It could for example have a waterfall or a sunset on it.

You have a screensaver painted onto the canvas? Why does there need to be something already on it?

I can't paint on an empty canvas. I'm just as allergic to that as I am to going on a journey into myself to find something to paint. And then I begin, maybe in the Hollywood tradition, to project things onto it. Later my assistants fill out the details. I say to them: "Can you make that green, red, blue?" Though mostly I leave things like that to them, too, because to me it really doesn't matter. The big question is: How, in 2016, do you make a composition? Is it important to paint yourself? I think sometimes it is and sometimes it isn't. You have to leave it open. I paint over a projection. Everything is a projection, at least for me, here and now.



It is all traced, copied?

That's right. I never have an idea of my own. So at some point it becomes my idea, of course. It's exactly because it is so much about me and so loaded with Romantic references that I have to be careful not to fall into the trap of also having to paint it myself. Eventually it became clear to me that my path to find myself takes me through that which is already there. Where do I stand within the entire violated image-world that is at our fingertips?

Words also play an important role, don't they?

I read and write a lot. One-liners or lyrics for songs. When I'm making collages I have sentences and words in my head that give rise to a kind of unbridled narration. I am not a pro. I see myself more in the role of a

songwriter, standing behind the assistant. And this distance is crucial: writing, selecting, adding and taking away.

Like a director, in fact.

The painter's problem is that sometimes you spend hours on a single thing and even when you've failed at it, you have massive problems killing it off because you have invested so much time and work in it. And yet, destroying things you've made is a really essential part of the process.

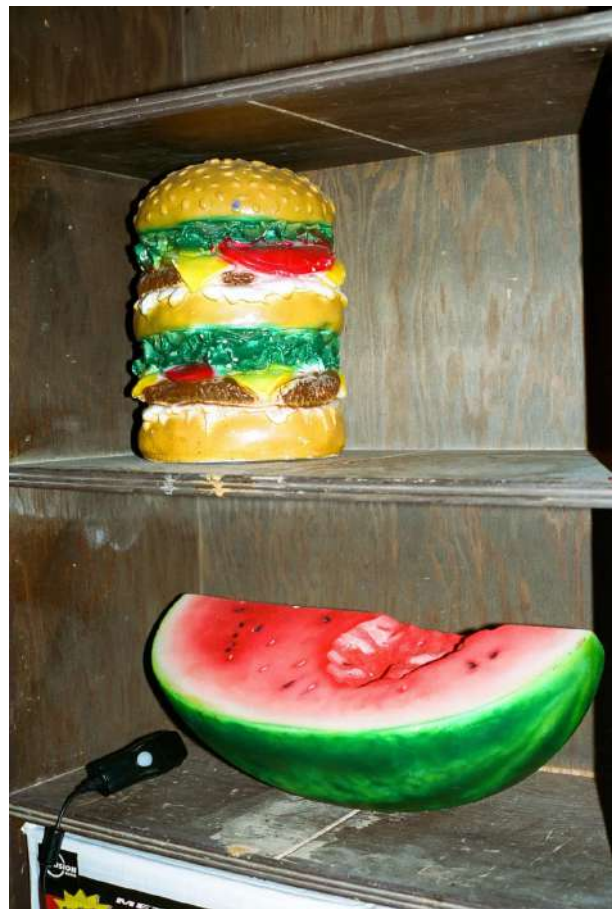


Could you say what things you keep coming back to?

I love how I can endow things that are around me with fetishistic characteristics. If you play a lot of tennis, as I do, you automatically begin thinking about tennis.

The solitude of the player on the court?

The ball always comes back, right? There's a work of mine for which I wrote "The Past" on the wall and played tennis against it. An endless Rorschach, an endless loop, a *conditio humana*. You get another go, again and again, but what you want and in the final analysis all you can do is to keep the ball in the game. Of course that's not why I play tennis. But when you're an artist, you inevitably start thinking about such a banal thing as a tennis ball in ways that let it explain the meaning of your life. Ultimately, you can do that with everything.



What else inspires you?

Probably music most of all. Music is like breathing. I do it every day and every night. Buying, archiving, listening, talking, and reading about it. It's more than sounds in a room. What does it do to me? Maybe I am a musician manqué. Maybe I am playing guitar with the paintbrush.

Your works often stage an ironic, elaborate form of failure. It's hard to say if it's tragedy or comedy.

You could perhaps say that I give failure a certain elegance. If you take away the horror, then failure is wearing a suit. The literary critic Marcel Reich-Ranicki once said it's better to cry in a taxi than in a tram.

Because it looks better?

Most important is that it feels better.



You've also taken an interest in perfumes for some time.

I've always collected perfumes. It started by accident, just out of curiosity. But at some point I realized that smells are actually invisible sculptures. I make videos, photos, objects, and paintings, and suddenly I seemed to have another building block that can, amazingly, not be represented or grasped visually. But maybe a particular yearning or irony can also manifest as an invisible sculpture. I met a perfumer and asked them: What does arrogance smell like? We had exciting conversations. It wasn't so different from being in the studio. And in the end you flip out because it really works. You take in a smell and something comes into your mind. I find that interesting in my pictures, too. When something touches your feelings it mostly has to do with the reactivation of a memory.



What do we latch onto when we smell something?

Whatever it was that you smelled in your mom's kitchen or in your grandpa's backyard. Your girlfriend's first perfume. Ninety-nine percent of childhood memories are still triggers for something today. Right now we're working on the question: What does a sunset smell like? Sunsets are actually, in terms of art history, symbols of mourning and pretty negative, with connotations of death. So would they smell morbid, or romantic, sweet, bitter? There are a lot of variations.



Why is it that smells have such an immediate punch?

Biologically speaking, our sense of smell works without being filtered in any way. When you see something, it passes into your visual cortex and only then is a signal passed on for processing. Taste and hearing are the same: they always go through a processor first. What gets into your nose, however, goes directly—wham!—to your brain. At the moment there's a perfume for sale here in L.A. that smells of a suntan lotion that was very popular in the 60s and 70s. When people who used it or smelled it in those days smell it again today, they are right back to, say, sitting in the back of the car on the way home from Malibu, with a towel blowing in the wind. It's time travel, through the nose.



View of “Friedrich Kunath,” 2015. Foreground: *B.C. (Fraktur)*, 2015. Background: *You Know We Can’t Go Back*, 2015. Photo: Roman Maerz.

Friedrich Kunath

BQ

In Friedrich Kunath’s painting *It’s Friedrich* (all works cited, 2015), the handwritten title phrase emerges from an old-fashioned, corkscrew-cord telephone held out by an anthropomorphic cartoon tree. The latter—a black-lined overlay, like David Salle for tots—sits on a landscape that runs Romanticism through an Athena-poster filter: above, an empurpled sky full of clouds that themselves resemble craggy mountains; below, aquamarine river water hammering rocks, upon which the tree—smiling—stands. By this point, several suavely vulgarized landscapes into the German-born, Los Angeles-based Kunath’s exhibition “Sentimental Air,” it takes the viewer a moment to register that the Friedrich referred to might be the present-day artist himself, and not (or not only) Caspar David. Indeed, the work can appear emphatically driven by the problem of nostalgia, by theatrical longing not only for real sublimity but even for a poster-shop debasement of same.

Two decades into his career, Kunath’s work risks inviting a symbolism-laden, downbeat read when aligned with his biography: that of a German landscape painter, at the fag end of a noble artistic tradition, marooned amid the superficialities and

polluted sunsets of SoCal, a one-man microcosm of civilization's decline. Paintings such as *I'm OK by Myself*, whose solitary black cat serves as auxiliary *Rückenfigur* while gazing, from a high point, over a tacky pink-and-blue cloud canopy at twilight—the title phrase is spelled out there in puffy cumuli—can seem to expend themselves in real time, their cheap satisfactions structurally analogous to the shallow contemporary reality Kunath outwardly evokes. But to apply this interpretative approach is to succumb to the pitfall of impatience, stuffing the artist into a box in which he doesn't quite fit; one misses the sincerity, even circumspect hopefulness, cached in the work.

In *Cloudy (Island)*, one of six paintings on cute, overlapping, cutout Styrofoam cloud shapes, the artist has sketched a bedraggled couple on a humpy atoll, beneath a palm's shade, an ocean liner passing behind them. The sketch, floating over the background of a smooth, airbrushed seascape, resembles a prompt for a *New Yorker* caption competition. But what's curious is that the couple, entranced by the blank sea, seems to not even notice the boat. In the present, they're also above it; such pockets of *something* feasibly numinous in the now glimmer across Kunath's work. Time-travel is not an option: *You Know We Can't Go Back* is the title of another painting—featuring a pair of heavy, pseudo-eighteenth-century sunset or sunrise landscapes, one on each end, and rotating hypnotically on the wall in the gallery's white-carpeted upstairs space, while ominous music by the 1970s German art-rock band Popol Vuh surges from an iPod dock. The sculpture *Let It Happen*, meanwhile, features a giant sculpted meerkat trying to sleep on orange-foam-rubber earplugs, the neon outline of a crescent moon beside it.

Nostalgia, Kunath avers, is easy. What's harder is finding some kind of grandeur in a present that always compares badly with the patinated past. The works in "Sentimental Air" don't try to show feelings of transitory elevation, knowing they can't, and there's a seeming reason—even if it's the weakest work—why Kunath has scattered the upstairs space with big, doodled-on sculptures of pointing fingers aimed at nothing visible. In terms of actual content, the resulting works are doughnut-shaped, but generously so: In gesturing toward someone else having their heightened instant, or stumbling toward the instant itself, or setting up the conditions for it—like the man with his head in an evanescent blue gap in billowing auburn clouds in the sketch-on-landscape of *Cloudy (Ladder Man)*—they advance something similar for all of us, even amid the flotsam and reflex retrospection of this world.

—*Martin Herbert*



Au Crédac, l'adulcescence rêveuse de l'artiste-voyageur Friedrich Kunath

02 MARS 2014 | PAR [CHRISTOPHE CANDONI](#)

Au **Crédac**, le Centre d'art contemporain d'Ivry-sur-Seine, « *A Plan to Follow Summer Around the World* » sillonne les errances imaginaires de l'artiste allemand Friedrich Kunath, un adolescent à peine quarantenaire qui, pour sa première exposition française, se présente en voyageur solitaire et rêveur.

Une illusion de légèreté transparaît de l'univers insolite particulièrement intrigant et séduisant de Friedrich Kunath dont les œuvres récentes et certaines inédites sont présentées à Ivry. Son travail, pas forcément des plus novateurs mais formidablement stimulant s'inspire de matériaux hétéroclites englobant l'histoire de l'art, le cinéma et la culture populaire mais aussi sa propre histoire personnelle et sa relation intime avec les objets.

Poétique et décalée, drôle et profonde, son œuvre sous toutes les formes qu'elle propose (dessin, peinture, sculpture, photo, vidéo...) exprime une irrépressible envie d'ailleurs, de départs, d'inconfort, d'inconnu, et à ce titre l'inscription hyper flash *I am goodbye* écrite avec des tubes fluorescents ne peut mieux définir son signataire. L'exposition se place en effet sous les signes du voyage, du déplacement, à l'image de l'importante installation *We Are Nowhere and It's Now* qui entasse au centre de la première salle de visite des dizaines de vieilles valises dont certaines suspendues se

déploient comme un oiseau prend son envol sur les accords discrets et délicats d'un piano mélancolique.

Dans la peau d'un voyageur lunaire et incertain ayant soif d'évasion, Friedrich Kunath se met lui-même en scène et en vidéo. Dans *A bout soufflé*, l'artiste court et bondit par tous les temps et tous les paysages qui défilent au rythme effréné de changements de plans incessants ; plus calme et las, il est dans *If I Were Tree Among Trees*, un Pierrot affublé d'une grosse tête de bonhomme de neige qui arpente, valise à la main, un paysage massif et aride proche du *Zabriskie Point* d'Antonioni.

A la fin de la visite, d'affreuses têtes tristes et lessivées de touristes consuméristes pointent leur nez sorti de sacs de voyage Vuitton comme gavés de mer bleue, de soleil couchant, d'horizon luisant, autant de clichés récupérés par l'imagerie publicitaire qui vend du rêve pour des marques de luxe.

Le plus insaisissable voyage proposé par Kunath est celui de se dérober, se soustraire au monde. C'est le parcours d'un homme sans tête assis sur un banc, les mains bien enfoncées au fond des poches de son imper, qui progressivement s'efface jusqu'à l'invisible au cours des cinq sérigraphies sur toile qui composent *Dynamic Stabilization*. Il disparaît du tableau tandis que seul un petit papillon coloré persiste à s'accrocher sur le bout de sa chaussure. En douze tirages photo, *For Everyman* met en scène un autre homme de dos qui se dévêt laissant ses habits derrière lui à mesure qu'il avance et qui disparaît au bout du chemin droit et isolé qui le conduit vers la mer.

On pourrait croire Kunath désenchanté si nous n'étions tout à coup mis face à d'aussi blagueuses productions que ses toiles très ironiques ou bien encore son surréaliste *Honey, I'm Home* où l'artiste fait choir un œuf sur le bout d'un énorme mocassin. Désabusé et farceur, Kunath est autant l'un que l'autre, avec un sens de la dérision notable. Né à Chemnitz en ex-RDA en Allemagne – le sofa miteux et l'abat-jour qui trônent dans la troisième et dernière salle semblent en être des témoins sans âge -, il vit et travaille aujourd'hui à Los Angeles. Son œuvre porte en elle cette double appartenance conjuguant le *Sturm und drang* propre au pays de Goethe et la culture pop acidulée à l'américaine et nous entraîne comme dans un rêve étrange.

Photo © André Morin / le Crédac

Friedrich Kunath's fever dream at Blum & Poe



Artist Friedrich Kunath at a show of his work at the Blum and Poe gallery in Los Angeles. (Anne Cusack, Los Angeles Times)

By JORI FINKEL, LOS ANGELES TIMES
OCT. 14, 2012 12 AM PT

Walking into Friedrich Kunath's show at Blum & Poe is like stumbling into a dream that is at once madcap and melancholy.

The paintings bring together a mishmash of images, whether goofy cartoon animals or brooding men from 19th-century German etchings. On the floor is a trail of giant shoes — replicas of men's penny loafers filled not with feet but with odd objects like a massive matchstick or a big banana.

The deeper you walk into the show, the closer you get to the dreamer-character himself, a painfully lonely man who ultimately appears in two forms: a lumpy sculpture slumped on the floor and a character in a 17-minute film shown adrift on land and at sea. The film is called "You Go Your Way and I'll Go Crazy."

The show feels like one big hallucination of this shipwrecked or exiled man.

"I would say fever dream," said the artist, 38, something of an exile himself, having grown up in East Germany and lived in Berlin and Cologne before landing five years

ago in L.A.. “To me hallucination always implies drugs. I think fever dream because there’s a little more truth there or the promise of something real.”

Whatever you call it, the show easily ranks as Kunath’s most ambitious. Not only is it two or three times the size of most solo shows (with 32 paintings, 14 sculptures, an installation and a film, all made this year), but many works are large and dizzyingly dense.

“It’s a real game-changer,” says independent curator Douglas Fogle, who describes an explosion or escalation of themes found in earlier work at Blum & Poe here and the Andrea Rosen gallery in New York. Next: a museum show in Hannover, Germany, this fall and a major touring show in Europe organized by Modern Art Oxford next year.

This summer, while preparing for the L.A. show, Kunath also became a father for the first time. “It pushed me in weird ways,” he said during a visit to the gallery. “I was so agitated by all this life.”

He was wearing jeans, a black jacket and, yes, loafers. “I love loafers,” he said with a soft German accent. “I don’t like to tie my shoes, and I don’t like to wear socks. They’re a good way to walk through life.”

He also likes their cultural history, talking about their association with New England preppies as a “transatlantic myth,” considering they were really invented in Norway — hence the name Weejuns (for Norwegians).

Looking down at the giant loafer-sculptures, Kunath noticed scuff marks on the lurid yellow carpet covering the concrete gallery floors. “I wanted something on the ugly side, and this was perfect. It reminded me of a kid’s room in Czechoslovakia,” he said.

The Blum & Poe show, open through Oct. 27, is called “Lacan’s Haircut,” but Kunath says it is not a reference to French psychoanalytic theory. Rather, he liked playing the everyday against the high-minded.

He also brings high and low together within a single painting. He typically begins the process by making a color-field-style painting by pouring, spraying or brushing paint on a thin layer of muslin on the floor “and letting the colors marinate,” he said.

He then tacks the muslin up on the wall to make paintings and drawings based on projected images, putting assistants to work as well. After that, he fleshes out images freehand before the painting is stretched and mounted on heavier canvas.

Almost all images start with existing real-world sources. Many come from books. Others are modeled on a mix of objects he collects in his studio: animal figurines, Hermès scarves, tennis rackets, musical instruments and other finds from EBay and flea markets. Snippets of text come from pop songs or sound like they could have.

His work is at root Surrealist collage, though closer in spirit to the overlaid images of Francis Picabia or enigmatic narratives of Max Ernst than the seamless landscapes of Dali or Magritte.

For one canvas he placed a shiny American cowboy boot on the foot of an 18th-century Romantic figure by German painter Julius Schnorr von Carolsfeld. Another brings together a Dutch vanitas skull, a Jiminy Cricket-like character, and an ice cream bar against a psychedelic mountain landscape.

“You have these dots and you want to connect them. I always felt I wanted to have the dots but not connect them,” Kunath said. “Meaning always comes after for me.”

In many paintings, the color-field-style background provides coherence for disjunctive images. In others, the canvas is ruled like notepaper, with the idea of a notebook — that catch-all for jottings and doodles throughout the day — serving as an organizing motif.

“The illusion of a notebook allows me to put things on canvas that have no connection to each other but in the end make sense, a democracy of sense. The logic of the notepad is a democracy of images,” he said.

“Democracy” is a loaded word for Kunath, born in 1974 in the East German town of Karl-Marx-stadt, which changed its name to Chemnitz after the fall of the Berlin Wall. Or, as the artist says, “I was born in a state that no longer exists.”

He spent his early years in East Berlin with his stepfather, mother and a lot of musicians, who often slept at their house because his mother managed rock bands. He describes it as a “hippie, ‘60s sort of community — except that some of our close friends and family turned out to be members of the Stasi,” he said. “Did you see the movie ‘The Lives of Others?’” a reference to the 2006 film about daily life under the powerful East German secret police.

When he was a teenager, his family moved to West Berlin and then to the city of Braunschweig. He describes landing in art school despite his lack of focus thanks to his mother: “She took my stuff and applied for me without my knowing it.”

He got in — to the HBK or Braunschweig University of Art. There his interests drifted a bit and he held odd jobs but also discovered artists like Bas Jan Ader, the lyrical and mystical Dutch artist who is believed to have died in the course of one performance: an attempt to sail single-handedly across the Atlantic called “In Search of the Miraculous.”

“He was almost like a musician or James Dean character in his biography,” Kunath said. “But what he really did for me and artists of my generation was find ways to connect conceptual art with a certain emotional approach. How can I conceptually say I love you? How can I analyze it but still have the emotion intact?”

In 1998 Kunath moved to Berlin, where he got his first exhibition (watercolors) with a gallery called BQ. He landed in Cologne a couple of years later, still working day jobs. But most of this time seems like a haze, he said, because of drinking and drugs. What he calls a “classic crossroads moment” came in 2003 when he was hospitalized for a pancreatic infection. He was 29, and the doctor warned him that he would be dead in three months if he didn’t stop drinking.

While he was in the hospital, the gallerist Joern Boetnagel (the “B” in BQ gallery) visited him with a proposal. The gallery had a spot in the Statements section of the art fair Art Basel, designed to showcase new artists: Would Kunath do it?

“So I’m laying in the hospital bed and felt a mixture between excitement and complete, instant fatigue,” Kunath said. “I got home and started this body of work that just spurted out of me.

“In retrospect I think it happened because I stopped drinking: I had the gift of doing a body of work with clarity, even though the work was all about confusion.”

The Statements show included a painting of a black door that says “If you leave me, can I come too?” There was also a video showing Kunath enacting a series of futile or vulnerable public actions — like trying to hand out flowers and hugs to strangers in a German train station — intercut with footage of an albino gorilla in captivity.

Jeff Poe of Blum & Poe said he was bowled over by the video, which BQ accidentally left running one night and he saw before the fair opened the next morning. “It wasn’t put together well or edited well. But I was emotionally devastated by it. I must have watched it four or five times in a row.”

He soon talked to Kunath’s German dealers about showing the work, even before checking in with his own gallery partner.

Another early fan was Fogle, the curator who bought his work for the Walker Art Center in 2004 and included him in the 2008 Carnegie International. Fogle calls the new paintings antiheroic, suggesting that their humor prevents them from sliding into sentimentality. “They are almost like slapstick history paintings — Buster Keaton meets Caspar David Friedrich,” he said, referring to the German Romantic painter.

Drawn to L.A. like so many other artists, Kunath now talks about the tension in his work in terms of a sunshine-noir dynamic as well. And he has planted references to Southern California throughout his new work — the tennis rackets, images of ripe fruit and a funny face carved into an orange among them.

The video, which uses Kunath sculptures as props, is even more steeped in the area, shot on a beach in Malibu among other sites. The main — and only — character is a despairing, aging man who is handsome enough he could have been an actor. The man goes sailing in the Santa Monica Bay, tries to fry an egg in a skillet on the beach, and moves through other (largely improvised) vignettes in the film trying to connect to someone or maybe anyone.

But his phone is unplugged; his suitcase is flooded with water; connections fail. In the final scene he rests his head on a bowl filled with tiny cactuses, as though it were a pillow.

The video, and for that matter the show as a whole, displays so much naked emotion that you can almost feel the edgy contemporary art crowd begin to squirm.

The sheer quantity of works also makes some people nervous, with at least one competing dealer suggesting the show should have been half the size.

Kunath shrugs off the criticism, suggesting it says more about the current fetish for minimalism than his own work.

“Sometimes you go into a gallery and there’s this little color-field painting and a little feather nearby. I’ve seen so much of that,” he said. “I feel like it’s time for some content.”

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The Most Beautiful World in the World: Friedrich Kunath, White Cube, London.



Review by Matt Swain

White Cube Hoxton Square presents the first solo UK exhibition by Friedrich Kunath. Born in Germany and based in Los Angeles, his work covers an impressive range of mediums, encompassing sculpture, painting, drawing, photography and installation, often incorporating text among these techniques. Conceptual art, German romanticism and Symbolism permeate Kunath's artistry and he frequently references popular culture - song titles are a particular favourite - together with lyrics and books.

Entering the ground floor gallery is at once like entering a museum of the extraordinary. There is a great air of adventure and the heady aroma of incense fills the room as you are confronted by the horn playing banana man sculpture that is *Starlite Walker*. Welcome to Kunath's improbable and surreal utopia; the world according to Kunath.

Kunath has a variety of drawing styles which are layered onto colourful watercolour washes, often accompanied by handwritten text, cartoons and doodles. Throughout, he explores themes of love, hope, despair and vulnerability that are infused with tragicomic pathos and dreams of possibilities. These works are about human beings trying to find their way in the world, lost souls making explorations of the human condition. Male figures, non-specific and often alone are caricatures that can elicit sympathy or even empathy, becoming cartoons of emotion. *I heard I was in town* bears the text 'Over-lonely and Under-kissed' whilst *Let those I don't care days begin* depicts a seated man resting on a staff beneath a tree at sunset pondering his life. In particular, the middle aged male protagonist questioning how his life has unfolded continually reappears, reflecting on what has gone before and what lies ahead. There are regrets and aspirations as destiny unfolds in *Younger Men Grow Older*, a rich and multi-layered emotional journey and the psychedelic *Paisley Past*.

Amongst the visual bombardment, one could initially assume that the lone figure who repeatedly occurs in Kunath's work endlessly searching for his heart and home is self-referencing. In reality, it is almost certainly a longing for human connection and revelation, a comment on society's values and a desire for a return to a more simplistic way of life and a certain purity. Sharing loneliness can be a

beautiful thing; this is about life journey of the individual - people struggling to define their lives. Yet there is resilience in these characters - they keep walking, keep moving on and are here to share their tale. We are looking at playful optimism fighting what is ostensibly mid-life crisis. They are shadows against sunlight, a visual representation of the vulnerability of man against the vastness of the world and all that it brings.

The relocation from his native Germany to Los Angeles has clearly had a sizeable impact. Californian counter-culture has bled into Kunath's work, the results of which he has readily acknowledged, stating: "the colours got brighter and the topics got darker". This is a place where the skies are not cloudy at all, at least until you close your eyes. The desert landscape of *I saw God's shadow on this world* shows cacti providing shade from the burning sun. In a world shrunk by globalisation and information overload, our attention spans have been splintered into tiny fragments, yet somehow Kunath has used this to his advantage, seizing on small moments, forgotten oddities, the faded and the obsolete, ensuring that his works don't fall prey to commercial navigation. Kunath's elements are culturally deeper, representing the layers of life - each piece is unique but universal. *All the sleeves are brown and the tie is grey (California Dreaming)* features a man on a battered raft floating on a wild sea, the text of the title inscribed above him.

Part of a series of surreal sculptures, *The tear will love us apart*, shows a reclining male sculpture watching a film chronicling a journey between past and present, whilst a model train runs through his head and body. In *One day we will follow the birds*, we discover the source of the incense, a powerful and evocative stimuli for the human spirit. This is a remarkable piece, a spoken word track over a melancholic piano backdrop, the voice intoning from the loudspeaker thoughts and emotions such as: "I didn't expect to remain the same but I didn't know what to expect" and "No matter how hard I try to remember, sometimes I forget to come back". A figure next to a second loudspeaker, wearing Kunath's clothes and holding balloons observes all of this, whilst a bird rests on his elongated nose. It is as if you are falling in love one minute and then saying goodbye to your heart in the next, a temporary dislocation of the senses. Kunath is pulling you into his world, circumventing reality.

In the first floor gallery, *Sad Polo (One of these days, these days will end)* is a denizen of vibrant colour, jockeys battling underneath the text of the title, whilst *Window Pain* depicts a young boy sitting on window ledge staring into a night sky, one suspects in wonderment rather than melancholy despite its title. The defining beauty is in the implied and sometimes explicit realism that Kunath brings to this improbable world and the universal shared experiences of yearning, disappointment and discovery. Nobody should ever be afraid to be brave and Kunath fearlessly evokes memories and emotions with a real sense of intimacy. Ambition is evident in Kunath's range of scale, his passion inextricable from all of the ideas, colours and happenings that run through his work. Literary, evocative and deceptively simple, it is a surprisingly smooth, cohesive ride against a backdrop of optimism which Kunath then seeks to undermine with subtle irony ambiguity and self-deprecating humour.

There are contradictions, but they are beautiful, deliberate, poetic contradictions, the kind that can only be found by someone in love with this life, and who can see all of it's subtleties and intricacies. That we should always remain inherently hopeful is reflected in the title of the exhibition. Strangers that will never meet again, faces that we'll never see again, one day that will never be again; it is all here, in this room, in the here and now.

The Most Beautiful World in the World continues at [White Cube](#), Hoxton Square until 4 June 2011.

Friedrich Kunath
© the artist
Photo: Ben Westoby
Courtesy White Cube

Friedrich Kunath

BQ

Friedrich Kunath's recent exhibition "Hello Walls" was his first at BQ since the Cologne gallery relocated earlier this year to Berlin, where gallerists Jörn Bötnagel and Yvonne Quirnbach have opted against maintaining a permanent display space in favor of an itinerant structure utilizing temporary sites around the city. On this occasion, BQ inhabited a ground-floor apartment in a prewar building just behind Humboldt University. The air of domesticity was accentuated by the inclusion of thrift-store finds such as a worn-out bed, a flip-style alarm clock, table lamps, and candles, plus wall-to-wall plush carpeting in two of the rooms. These props accompanied more than fifty works including paintings, photographs, sculpture, and a video, most of them produced by the artist in the Los Angeles home that also doubles as his studio.

One room, resembling an angst-ridden teenager's attic hideaway, was completely draped in bolts of fabric with quirky patterns (Mexican Day of the Dead motifs, a sock monkey hanging from a giant banana in the sky, a bucolic British hunting scene) on top of which other works were hung, including a sad little bald cartoon man holding a pistol to his forehead (*Untitled*, 2008, silkscreen print and spray paint on paper) and a child alone in bed amid ominous blobs of yellow, blue, and brown (the painting *In Your Room*, 2009). In a corner a group of ceramic bats hung from the ceiling, while on the floor below them lay sculptural renditions of the discarded contents of a pocket—loose change, keys, and a matchbook with a telephone number scrawled on the inside cover (*Broke Bats*, 2008).

In another room, a group of framed photographs (each *Untitled*, 2009) depicted witty ensembles created from the extensive array of objects (figurines, toys, and other assorted consumer detritus) collected by the artist. In one, pop idol Andy Williams flashes a toothy grin on the cover of his 1974 album *The Way We Were* as a human cranium with Ping-Pong-ball eyes spills its teeth out in front of the supplicating gaze of a tiny raccoon. On an adjacent wall, a black ceramic cat lay expectantly on a pedestal mounted in front of a black paperboard mouse hole (*After the Love Is Gone*, 2009), while in the next room a boot with a roof (reminiscent of the nursery rhyme "The Old Woman Who Lived in a Shoe") emitted a scarcely audible recording of Kunath pattering around his Berlin apartment as the matching boot in the pair sat uselessly on the floor. That work, *Untitled*, 2009, could conceivably be thought of as a self-portrait, but more conspicuously so were two large photographs of a man reading fictitious self-help books and a video that followed an individual dressed as a snowman and holding a small suitcase, vainly attempting to traverse rugged desert terrain with a sad, simple melody composed by an amateur musician sounding in the background (all *Untitled*, 2009). Humorously self-deprecating reflections about marginality and failure, along with the combination of pathos and violence characteristic of fairy tales, set a playful yet melancholic tone: The works managed to feel excruciatingly intimate precisely because they attempted to reinvest the utterly ubiquitous and bland vocabulary of commodity culture with an endearing and redemptive quality. It's what pop songs sometimes do—but only in retrospect, once they have fallen from the charts and their formulaic structures have taken on the sublime value of personal memory and historical nostalgia.

—Michèle Faguet

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Two long, narrow rooms, right next to each other, both visible from the street through high windows—this was the setting of the installation by Cologne-based artist Friedrich Kunath at Galerie BQ. Although the two rooms could only be entered separately from the street, they were connected by one element: In the right-hand room, the flue pipe of a small green tiled stove went through the dividing wall and twisted around in the left-hand room. Apart from this pipe, however, the two juxtaposed spaces seemed to contain two completely different worlds.

Recent paintings by Kunath covered the entire right-hand wall of the right-hand room, which looked like the cozy living room of an older man. There were small shabby rugs on the floor, two lamps, the tiled stove, and three photographs on the wall behind the stove. The paintings, mostly watercolors on canvas, were of different sizes. Their faded colors lent them a nostalgic quality. Some of the paintings had a psychedelic look and contained phrases, such as MAYBE NOT, written backward. There was a slightly absurd lamp fitted with a conical lampshade that reached the floor. A sentence Kunath once read, “Sometimes darkness can give you the brightest light,” inspired him to create this lighting fixture that negates its function. The actual source of light in this room was an enormous yellowish lightbulb lying on one of the rugs.

This room might have evoked childhood memories, or perhaps slightly disturbing childhood nightmares. One photograph, *Untitled*, 2007, shows an elderly man sitting quietly at a set table while in the background a barn is consumed by flames; another pictured a stranded ship and a small cuddly dog running away from it. And then there was that strange stove, and the sculpture of an enormous matchstick standing on the window ledge, whose “shadow”—actually made of charred wood—looked like another, burned-down matchstick. This was a surreal place, even if the room also provided a certain slightly stuffy comfort.

The room next door was quite different. The flue pipe twisted and turned here, dominating the space like a Minimalist sculpture. A mathematical formula that refers to the construction of the pipe covered the entire front wall. Its severity was contradicted by a bicycle built for two, its front part in good condition, its rear section rusting away, bent and twisted. Like the matchstick and its charred shadow, this object combines the contradictory and the absurd. The bicycle was leaning against a wall covered by a huge painting of an exploding sunset, creating a dreamlike and hallucinatory feeling. Kunath has described his work as “psychedelic Minimalism,” a contradiction that also borders on the absurd.

But this installation was not about understanding; it was about creating personal worlds that comment on what is happening outside. “Today it is no longer possible to know everything,” according to Samuel Beckett. “The link between the self and the world of objects no longer exists. . . . We have to create our own worlds in order to fulfill our need for knowledge, in order to understand, to satisfy our need for order.” Maybe these two rooms, which I could well imagine as sets for a Beckett play, meant to evoke our universal need to know, albeit with an awareness that this desire can never be satisfied. The more we know, the more we slip into ignorance, into the abyss of absurdity. However, that bleak fact does not stop us, as the right-hand room of the installation showed, from creating cozy corners in the world.

—Noemi Smolik

Translated from German by Jane Brodie.

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“Welcome Home Steve Curry” was the title under which Friedrich Kunath, born in 1974, opened the new gallery BQ in Cologne's Belgian Quarter, which has again become more important in recent years as new spaces have appeared. Drawings, a small sculpture, and recent videos, several of which were created specifically for this exhibition, centered on the theme of failure. The word itself was put into play—almost as a motto for the show—in a large work (*Untitled*, 2002) made of black carbon paper bearing a quotation written in chalk in which Thomas Edison declares that none of his inventions were failures, but that among them were ten thousand possibilities that didn't happen to work. Accordingly, the joys of such so-called mistakes and playful experimentation were apparent in the works exhibited here. A typical example was a small sculpture lying on the floor, apparently a godchild of the Dutch Conceptualist Bas Jan Ader. Kunath's sculpture keeps to primary colors, while the materials used—red velour fabric, yellow-painted sandpaper, blue-painted wood—casually depart from any claim to “purity.” The text, which reads WHAT HAPPENS WHEN YOU TRY TO FAIL AND THEN SUCCEED, puts an additional ironic twist on failure, a central theme for Ader as well, who represented it as falling, not quite the opposite of success.

This pleasure in falling and in highly awkward situations that make random passersby into unwitting accomplices characterized Kunath's earlier videos *After a While You Know the Style*, 2000, and *I Am Not Patrick Swayze*, 2001. In *After a While*, we see Kunath strutting around the streets of Hamburg and falling down quite a bit along the way. The passersby, who react either indignantly or with horrified concern, can't be sure whether these stumbles are accidental or are meant to provoke them. This mixture of apparent coincidence and obvious theatricality is transposed into a provocative stance in *I Am Not Patrick Swayze*. This video shows Kunath attempting several times to climb a tree, then suddenly falling down in front of a pedestrian and either remaining there or lying down in a flower bed. *I Am Not Patrick Swayze*, like *After a While* and his most recent video, *When Was the First Time You Realized the Next Time Would Be the Last Time?*, 2002, appropriates the form of the music video and combines it with elements of slapstick, TV entertainment formats like the candid camera, and moments of filmic collage, such as in the new video when he focuses on the eternally idyllic details of the Melaten cemetery in Cologne. While in his early videos Kunath was acting out and thus putting himself in potentially uncontrollable situations, in *When Was the First Time* he provokes the passersby from a safe distance—which renders the new video, despite its greater formal resolution, rather one-dimensional.

The ambiguity of Kunath's approach, with its equally ludic and casually melancholy little pranks, becomes most pointed in his drawings, the medium he has pursued most consistently. Thus a loosely rendered watercolor drawing from 2002 of two profiles is subtitled *Most People Deserve Each Other*; and on an otherwise empty page he makes the lapidary note: WHEN SOMETHING NEEDS TO BE PAINTED IT LETS ME KNOW.

—Astrid Wege

Translated from German by Sara Ogger