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Jahn und Jahn  
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Karin Kneffel  
Face the Face

25.10.2024–18.1.2025  
Baaderstraße 56 B

Opening: Thursday, October 24, 2024, 6–9pm

The exhibition *Face the Face* by Karin Kneffel at Jahn und Jahn in Munich presents a series of double portraits of the same format. While one picture always shows the face of a female figure, the respective companion piece is the face of a small child. The colouring and appearance of the heads suggest their origins in sculptural models. The depiction of mother and child has a firm place in Christian religious art from the Middle Ages to modern times. Countless paintings and sculptures have been dedicated to the Madonna and Child over the centuries, making it undoubtedly one of the most popular motifs in Western-influenced art history. But why did Kneffel model her mother and child pictures on painted wooden sculptures from the 15th and 16th centuries?

The answer to this question lies firstly in sculpture itself, which on the one hand is not Kneffel's métier, and on the other hand is regarded in the art historical tradition as the medium that is supposedly closer to life than one-dimensional painting due to its multidimensionality. Now it is often those small sculptures of the Virgin Mary that once served the devotion of the faithful and clergy in monasteries and elsewhere, which, due to their materiality and purpose, sometimes have a peculiarly »wooden« piety and naïve religiosity in our eyes. The latter also deterred the artist from tackling this subject earlier, until she recognised the potential of such depictions of women as figures of identification through attentive observation and examination: completely thrown back on themselves, saddened and loving at the same time, they unaffectedly anticipate and endure the inevitable disaster lying in the future with a mostly introspective gaze.

Unlike in the wooden sculptures, in Kneffel's work the mother and child are separated from each other, but not isolated, as they relate to each other in a variety of compositional and colourful ways, forming an inseparable duo. The heads are greatly enlarged and have a haunting presence. The artist has taken care to preserve the original proportions of the mother and child figures. The woman's face is almost always cropped and fits into the same picture format as that of her child. Kneffel achieves something phenomenologically remarkable by transforming them into paintings: in the viewer's gaze, the pictorial models themselves disappear bit by bit, the characteristics of the statues recede into the background, while the female features depicted are brought to life. Are not all these sculptures in turn based on living models of flesh and blood, on real women who were viewed by mostly male artists in order to give shape to their ideas of God-fearing femininity? In this context, the depiction of motherhood was not without purpose, and by freeing the portraits of women from all religious ornamentation and assigning them their own place, their own image alongside that of their child, Kneffel opens up new worlds of thought, creating other levels of meaning and legibility.

Not all of the paintings in this series are based on photographs of wooden sculptures that the artist has made over the years in museums and churches. One of the »real« Madonnas is based on an AI-generated model. Another pair of pictures shows the artist's daughter-in-law with the grandchild. In this constella-

tion, the portraits are mutually dependent: in the painting, the real figures undergo a subtle transformation towards a sculpturally moulded appearance, while the sculptural undergoes a lively intensification.

Even during her time at the Düsseldorf Art Academy, Kneffel defied common assumptions about what one should paint and, in particular, what a woman should not paint. Such ideas were so repugnant to her that she rebelled against the denigration of so-called female issues as subjects of the arts. In the 1980s, she began to paint large-format, realistic grape pictures. As fruit paintings full of *joie de vivre*, they were reminiscent of advertising posters and contradicted the male-dominated zeitgeist of painting at the time. One could be forgiven for thinking that Kneffel's grapes combine ideas of pop art with the anecdote of the famous trial of strength between two ancient Greek painters, as handed down to us by Pliny the Elder in his *Naturalis historia*: Zeuxis of Heraclea is said to have been inferior to his fellow artist Parrhasius in the competition. While Zeuxis painted grapes that looked so real that they attracted birds, Parrhasius deceived his competitor with a painted curtain. Zeuxis fell into the painterly trap of his challenger when he demanded to pull away the curtain to see the picture behind it. If such literary descriptions of surpassing mimetic abilities serve above all to testify to the highest degree of artistry, they also reveal a rather old masculine power game in the race for the best artist. And Kneffel meets this hustle and bustle with humour, not only by creating what are probably the largest masterfully painted grapes in art history, but also by breathing new life into them in a kind of revival of her own art in the form of self-reflection. The optimistic fruits of that time are given an ambiguous twist in view of the silent and contemplative mothers of the diptychs, in a dark premonition of the transience of all existence.

The photographs of still lifes by the artist exhibited in the basement of the gallery are also to be understood in this context: A bouquet of flowers in the foreground – first in bloom, then wilted and finally dried up – merges with a flower painting in the background. The latter shows various stages of withering in splendid simultaneity. Both motifs become one picture in the viewer's imagination to form a new reality, a visually complex concept in the cycle of life and death.

text by Anka Ziefer  
translation by Christina Degethof

**Karin Kneffel**, born 1957 in Marl, lives in Düsseldorf. Education: 1977–1981 Studied German literature and philosophy at the Universities of Münster and Duisburg, 1981–1987 Studied at the Düsseldorf Art Academy, master student of Gerhard Richter. 2000–2008 Professor at the University of the Arts, Bremen. 2008–2023 Professor at the Academy of Fine Arts, Munich. Awards & Prizes: 1984–1985 Semi-annual Scholarship at the Cité Internationale des Arts, Paris; 1991 Karl Schmidt-Rottluff Grant; 1994 Lingener Art Prize; 1996 Fellowship at the German Academy Rome Villa Massimo; 2011 Helmut Kraft Foundation Prize.

Selected Solo Exhibitions: 2024 MKM Museum Küppersmühle für Moderne Kunst, Duisburg; 2024 Museum Franz Gertsch, Burgdorf; 2024 Schönewald Fine Arts, Düsseldorf; 2023 MKK Museum Kurhaus Kleve; 2022 Gagosian Gallery, Rome; 2022 Franz Marc Museum, Kochel am See; 2022 Staatsgalerie Stuttgart; 2022 Max Ernst Museum, Brühl; 2020 Museum Frieder Burda, Baden-Baden; 2019 Kunsthalle Bremen; 2016 Gagosian Gallery, Beverly Hills, CA. (USA); 2015 Kunsthalle Bremerhaven; 2015 Käthe Kollwitz Museum, Cologne; 2014 De Arte Contemporáneo, La Coruña; 2014 Barcelona Pavilion, Fundació Mies van der Rohe, Barcelona; 2012 Gagosian Gallery, New York; 2012 Galerie Fred Jahn, Munich; 2012 Kunsthalle Tübingen; 2009 Haus Esters, Krefeld; 2008 Galerie Friese, Stuttgart, 2006 Ulmer Museum, Ulm.

Works by the artist are included, among others, in the collections of Staatsgalerie Stuttgart, Museum Frieder Burda in Baden-Baden, Kunstmuseum Bremerhaven, Unicredit Art Collection and Mercedes Benz Art Collection.

Selected Publications:

*Karin Kneffel. Face of a Woman, Head of a Child*, with contributions by Valentina Vlašić, Julia Voss & Anna Wesle, exh.-cat. Museum Kurhaus Kleve – Ewald Mataré-Collection, Kleve / Museum Franz Gertsch, Burgdorf, Kleve 2023, 180 p., DE/EN.

*Karin Kneffel. Come in, Look out*, ed. by Walter Smerling, with contributions by Ulrich Wilmes & Kay Heymer, exh.-cat. MKM Museum Küppersmühle für Moderne Kunst, Duisburg 2024, 240 p., DE/EN.

*Karin Kneffel – At the Moment [Im Augenblick]*, ed. by Achim Sommer, exh.-cat. Max Ernst Museum Brühl, Cologne 2022, 191 p., DE/EN.

*Karin Kneffel – In the Picture [Im Bild]*, ed. by Cathrin Klingsöhr-Leroy, exh.-cat. Franz Marc Museum, Kochel am See, Munich 2022, 103 p., DE/EN.

*Still – Karin Kneffel*, with contributions by Marion Poschmann & Eefke Kleimann, exh.-cat. Kunsthalle Bremen / Museum Frieder Burda, Baden-Baden, Munich 2019, 224 p., DE/EN.

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