

Dark Rainbow

Friedrich Kunath is not a painter. Nor is he a draftsman, sculptor, or filmmaker. He is all of these things at once. More specifically, he is an artist representative of his generation - one whose attitude, not to say aesthetic position, is one of flux. Contemporary flux, in which the perpetual motion of new technologies developing around us finds a number of forms of expression within his work. Recycling, collages, references, quotations - these are the tools with which he has chosen to construct his iconography while not letting himself be crushed by monolithic and dominant culture. Using various collisions, clashes, and stylistic crashes he puts into place an abundant iconography drawing on various sources, many of which are impacted by two poles - the culture of wisdom and popular culture - to the point of obsession and even, at times, systematization. Using the same strategies of superimposition and collage that feature in his pictorial works, he constructs a world on the basis of fragments from diverse repertoires - cinematic, televisual, literary and musical - to which he adds references to his own work whose lyricism combines past and present, happiness and melancholy.

Kunath's works form a fertile terrain uniting our era and the Middle Ages, the 18th century, the hippie period and 1970s Europe... and this creates surprising collages. Of course, we can recall the artist was born in East Germany before the fall of the Berlin Wall. We can imagine that history, politics, and art history weigh upon his art. We can evoke that inescapable German Romanticism, its melancholy and its *Gestalt*. However, ultimately, Friedrich Kunath, like a good number of today's creative artists, did not wait to move to the United States to feed himself and construct a vast East/West source culture. We know that globalization and new technologies changed the world and, of course, also art. Kunath's horizons drew on this but his artistic education was built on classical foundations as in Caspar David Friedrich's paintings, where man maintains a mystical relationship with nature. Kunath appears to us like a hyperrealist with a surrealist touch. A joker, he uses German Romanticism as a nod to his origins. Amongst his beacons, he readily mentions Dutch conceptual artist Bas Jan Ader (lost at sea in 1975). According to Kunath, Ader put into place a new and momentous alternative: the alliance of conceptual art with a certain emotion. With a sense of humour he, too, used certain references to Romanticism, for instance *Never Mind*, *Faraway Friends*, *Farewell to the Sun* (1971), a self-portrait turned towards the setting sun.

The course of the sun and the movement of the stars occupy an important place in Kunath's universe. For instance, the sleeve for the original soundtrack of the film *Jonathan Livingston Seagull* (1973) signed by Neil Diamond regularly appeared in his work. This image evokes several themes that are dear to him, including the sunset, the ocean, the freedom of Jonathan - a figure adored by adolescents the world over for his breaking of forbidden rules. Though ageless, his images are linked to an era - the 1970s, when Elton John sang 'Don't let the sun go down on me' (in 1974, the year Friedrich Kunath was born!).

On moving to Los Angeles, that city of the image, of fiction and fantasy, the iconography constructed by Kunath was electrified by its contact with Hollywood. His work is born of a collision between Albrecht Dürer's famous painting *Melancholia* (1514) and the world of Walt Disney and is amplified in an encounter between Baron von Münchhausen and the Wizard of Oz.

These few examples cannot really cover all the artist's references. They aim to introduce a number of short films made between 2003 and 2012 whose lyricism, along with the crystalline sensitivity preserved from adolescence, is enriched by a pronounced taste for the staging of the comic.

Friedrich Kunath likes staging, both in his exhibitions and projections. For his last exhibition at the BQ gallery in Berlin (April 2012) he invited us to a video concert evening at the Roter Salon. A sort of club, this salon is affiliated to the Volksbühne Theater in Berlin (an avant-garde theatre built in the early 20th century allowing the people to come into contact with art). The DJ duo J.D Twitch and J.G Wilkes came over from Glasgow to play music to the film *Is There Life Before Death* (2012). The title of the film alludes to a 1970s song *There Is Life Before Death* by the leftist political German singer-songwriter Wolf Biermann (father-in-law to the punk singer Nina Hagen). In contrast to Biermann's affirmative title, the nuance added by Kunath conveys the characteristic interrogation and doubt of his generation. A long travelling shot follows the slow progress of the character portrayed by the artist walking along LA's typical concrete dams. Wearing a trendy but frayed navy blue blazer, deck shoes and a straw hat topped with a (fake) parrot, he holds in one hand a (fake) bunch of grapes and in the other a (fake?) rope to hang himself. The parrot, a symbol of wealth and eloquence in western Christian culture, is also very popular on California beaches. Kunath unites contradictory symbols: next to the bunch of grapes (a Dionysian symbol of happiness and energy), he juxtaposes a rope, a sign of despair.

Kunath confronts all sorts of images suggesting both joie de vivre and the emptiness of existence. Metaphors and symbols make up this great enigmatic puzzle: naive images of golden, body-built youth are confronted with those of solitude... a snowman strolling through the desert... a fragment of Jack Arnold's film *The Incredible Shrinking Man* (1957) presents the telephone, a recurrent prop in Kunath's work, as an oversized item... a conductor directs a chant of cascades... natural disasters follow gags... a giant hand runs sand through its fingers... fragments of medieval paintings are juxtaposed with Épinal prints of birds flying against a red sky... finishing with the half-comic, half-existential fall of the artist into water.

The burlesque and absurd motif of this falling is present from the beginning with Kunath. In *About Soufflé* (2004) - whose title alludes both to the Jean-Luc Godard film and a culinary farce - he stages himself, for more than 30 minutes, jumping, falling, and running on a real solitary journey. He throws himself into the void and jumps into the permanent flux of life, making an ample and open movement to the world.

Likewise, *Going to Quauhnahuac* (2003) makes reference to Malcolm Lowry's book *Under the Volcano* (1947) which outlines a portrait of the fall of a man. 'This is Not the Life I Ordered' is the slogan traced across the artist's back in a typography that echoes Bas Jan Ader's desperate injunctions and his 'Please don't leave me' or Arthur Rimbaud's adolescent slogan 'Real life is elsewhere'. When the artist strips off his clothes, throwing them out the window (here again we are reminded of Bas Jan Ader and his 1970 piece *All My Clothes*), Kunath introduces as a feature in his work the voluntary move from the intimate to the breadth of an outlandish adventure with multiple vagaries. Our modern clown braves the forbidden in those temples of power that places of culture have now become. Appearing further away, filmed in slow motion, is the albino gorilla which lived as a curiosity at Barcelona Zoo until its death in 2003. Symbolizing the figure of the artist in the pictorial tradition since the Middle Ages, here he also portrays the absolute solitude that is linked to his singularity.

City of glamour and fun, beaches and surfing, Los Angeles is also a city close to the desert, with all the force of reference to the cinema and history of art this allows. In *Untitled* (2009), a character, half snowman, half whiteface clown (who also appears in *Is There a Life Before Death'*), carries a suitcase, the accessory of both the traveller and the exile. This cartoon Sisyphus attempts to trace a path through Death Valley. Alone and far from the tropism of his natural habitat, he strolls through this décor evoking Michelangelo Antonioni's cult film *Zabriskie Point* (1970). Our Pierrot is in search of the traces of this lost ambition - traces of youth who fought for peace and freedom, whose ideology was pulverized like the objects in the last scene of the film.

Highly sophisticated in cinematographic terms, the last of Kunath's videos entitled *You Go Your Way and I'll Go Crazy* (2012) uses a sensuality similar to the one we experience when viewing his paintings, in which he uses silk, lacquer, oils, and chooses for his motifs and recurrent props musical instruments, telescopes, moccasins, tennis rackets, luggage and luxury cars, bottles of perfume...

Until this point, Friedrich Kunath was the main character in his self-fictions. Yet the omnipresence of Hollywood no doubt led the artist to employ an actor. By choosing this ageing playboy, Kunath toys with the romantic and overused image of the solitary painter. Situated in his world of glamour fuelled by success (Porsche, villa, swimming pool, sailing yacht), this still-sexy man portrays a number of faces: one of apparent success, but also one of solitude, one of art, but also one of creation as a recent 'lifestyle' reflecting violent paradoxes in contemporary society.

Devilishly melancholic, this opus is a vanity in movement. The musical instruments are children's toys, fruit floats in a California swimming pool like so many shipwrecked still-lives, the omnipresent telephone is unplugged, the boat ready to lift anchor...

Thus, when our hero holds in his hand a face carved in a California orange, he no longer holds the skeleton of a skull but that of the 21st century's vanitas, less sombre yet more cynical, on a Malibu beach.

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In Friedrich Kunath. *In my Room*. Catalogue, Modern Art Oxford, ed. Walther König, Köln, 2013.