



«I'M NOT INTERESTED IN IRONY»

L'Esprit Nouveau, 2021
Polystyrene, lacquer, aluminium frame
107 x 91 cm
Photo: Marjorie Brunet Plaza
Private collection
Courtesy of the artist

Artworks: Hannah Sophie Dunkelberg
Interview: Chloe Stead

Hannah Sophie Dunkelberg explores fetishization in modern times by merging techniques from industrial production and regional craftsmanship with pop culture elements. In conversation with art critic Chloe Stead, Dunkelberg discusses the symbolism of girlishness, the role of femininity in patriarchal culture, and the use of humor to challenge dominant norms.



Altweiberknoten I, 2022
Powder coated metal
115 x 115 x 50 cm
Photo: Katarzyna Legendz
Syrena Real Estate Collection
Courtesy of the artist and
Gunia Nowik Gallery



Müdes Pferd, Wicky, 2022
Sofa, digital print on fabric,
lacquer, noble fir
121 x 187 x 106 cm
Courtesy of the artist and
Gunia Nowik Gallery

How did you become an artist?

There was no particular moment. I was always drawing or building stuff; taking things apart and putting them back together again. Everyone has the need to express themselves, and I think art is one of the most natural ways to do so.

I listen, I look, I observe. I usually don't make big plans. One work leads to another, or they run in sync. I just try out what I want to see in the world.

Looking at your practice over the years, I can see that sense of restlessness. You work in a variety of mediums using a broad range of techniques, but one body of work you keep coming back to is the wall reliefs. When did you start making them?

It was around 2017, while I was still studying at the UDK in Berlin. I was just playing around with machines and started to experiment with using them to draw on wood. I began as a painter, and canvas is so soft as a material, it shakes if you're too rough, but there is a resistance when working with hard surfaces that I immediately liked. I wanted to see what the wood drawings would look like from the other side, so I started making molds out of plastic with a vacuum forming machine. The process is a bit like printing because there is always an element of surprise. And it's not as precise and immediate as painting, which is an advantage, as I enjoy the distance these processes bring to my work. I'm not interested in immaculate surfaces. You can see imprints of little holes, screws and other stuff I use to work on these reliefs, which reveal the traces of their production.

I love that you are misusing all these tools! What are vacuum forming machines typically used for?

They're often used to make prototypes. To me, each artwork is a prototype for the artist's vision of the world, or for it, and using the vacuum former felt like a perfect translation of this idea. It was also a way to make abstract paintings while still having an anchor in the real world because plastic is a found material in a way – it surrounds us. Some of the material I use I discovered in an interior store. I think the reflective ones are used for making façades of bars or ugly hotels from the 2000s. There is a certain tension these real materials bring to my abstract drawings. They interfere with each other, they tease each other. Abstraction and reality co-exist and are co-dependent.

In an exhibition context, what I like about these pieces is that when the light changes, all the lines of the drawing also change. As you move around the room your reflection also moves with you. It's like walking through our modern cities, full of shiny glass façades, or a creepy hall of mirrors at a fun fair. The reflective reliefs are a scenery, a pastiche of their surroundings.

Alongside the reliefs made with mirrored surfaces, you also paint some with lacquer, creating quite distinctive colours. How do you choose them? Colours change with the mood of the day, don't they? Choosing them is a very intuitive decision. I try to pick

colours irrespective of the associations they have for people. It's impossible, of course, someone is always going to see yellow as a colour of warning, even if I didn't intend it to be. Another factor is that I'm utilising an industrial technique, so there are certain limitations. After I've produced the reliefs I take them to a auto paint shop and spray paint them. It's an expensive process, so until now I've mostly used one or two colours, a gradient, which means using one darker and one lighter colour. Recently, I made a multicoloured diptych for the first time for an exhibition at Kunsthalle Zürich.

When you emailed to ask me to collaborate on this interview, I was in Arles visiting a Judy Chicago retrospective at the LUMA Foundation. It felt like perfect timing since Chicago is, to my knowledge, the first woman to make paintings and sculptures using sprayed automotive lacquer. This was the mid-1960s, and she learnt the technique after enrolling at an auto body school. In the exhibition, I read that Chicago was the only woman among 250 male students.

It's still similar! I go to a workshop and when I arrive it's always a big joke. It's a very macho environment, but I'm used to it, many members of my family are manual workers. I give them five minutes to have their fun and then we get to work.

With Chicago, there is obviously an activist component to these works. She was taking something very stereotypically masculine and using it to produce something stereotypically feminine. There is a temptation to read your work in the same way, but I wondered if you still thought that was interesting to discuss in 2024.

If I was giving a talk or a tour of my work, it wouldn't be the first thing I would talk about; it's just there. I use these industrial processes because I like them, not because I want to prove to anyone that I can. I like the idea that the techniques I use have the potential to disenchant or destabilise historical narratives.

I made a series of sculptures of sleeping horses, which came out of my experience of just walking around big cities like Paris or Berlin and being amazed by how many monumental bronzes of horses with male heroes there are. It's so weird that these things still exist in our city landscapes. I mean, we're not saved by men on horses anymore, are we? I wanted to reassess this historical narrative from a contemporary perspective. In the installation, which I first showed during Berlin Art Week and Art Basel Paris in 2022, I offered these tired symbols a nap on a sofa. I thought they must need a rest after filling this patriarchal role for thousands of years!

Let's talk about the bows. It's another series where you take something quite feminine, even girly, and render it using industrial materials and processes.

For these works I weld and hammer huge bows out of steel. Encountering one of the pieces you might think it's cheerful and light. But it's actually very cold, heavy and monumental, like the shell of a car. My works carry many contradictory moments like this. There

are many similar elements in the works of Isa Genzken, Karen Kilimnik or Mike Kelly, for example. Their sculptures and paintings are full of playfulness and theatricality. I'm not interested in irony, but humour is important. It can reveal alienation.

Your works also just look great and photograph well. Is there a contradiction there?

The materials I use are seductive and therefore suspicious; everything decorative is always suspect, isn't it?

What are you working on right now?

I'm currently welding new metal sculptures that I will show at Paris Internationale in October with Gunia Nowik Gallery. At the same time, I'm also working on my first solo exhibition at Mehdi Chouakri in Berlin, which will open during Berlin Art Week in September. The project is dedicated to a new group of works with big glass bubbles, a new series of reliefs and stuffed teddy bears cast in aluminium. They are cute and cruel and a model for our imaginary. Entering the land of cuteness here is like diving into the world of human-made constructs. Once you realise that all objects and thoughts are constructed, you have the power to change them.



This page

Aimée, en rêve, 2022
Polystyrene, wooden frame
101 x 151 cm
Photo: Marjorie Brunet Plaza
Courtesy of the artist and
Gunia Nowik Gallery

Right page

Detail
Aimée, en rêve, 2022
Polystyrene, wooden frame
101 x 151 cm
Photo: Thea Giglio
Courtesy of the artist and
Gunia Nowik Gallery







Left page

Altweiberknoten II, 2022
Powder coated metal
93 x 90 x 30 cm
Photo: Katarzyna Legendz
Private collection
Courtesy of the artist and
Gunia Nowik Gallery

This page

Exhibition view
*Long Shadows Forecast Good Weather,
Bad Posture*, Lausanne, 2023
Photo: Thea Giglio
Courtesy of the artist and
Gunia Nowik Gallery