



View of “Mathis Altmann, Bonnie Camplin, Salvo, Lucie Stahl, Amelie von Wulffen,” 2018. From left: Bonnie Camplin, *Cerne Abbas Giant!*, 2018; Amelie von Wulffen, *Untitled*, 2014. Photo: Marcel Koehler.

Mathis Altmann, Bonnie Camplin, Salvo, Lucie Stahl, Amelie von Wulffen

GALERIE MEYER KAINER

Arguing against reductive reason, the German Jewish art historian, poet, and anti-fascist of the interwar period Carl Einstein wrote, “Every structuring is a complex function.” Whether that structuring takes the form of a city or a group show, his statement (included in the press release to this exhibition) continues to ring true. Since 2009, as part of the “Curated by” initiative, Viennese galleries have invited guest curators to mount exhibitions under a given theme—last year’s was the somewhat unwieldy “Viennaline.” In response, Melanie Ohnemus assembled an international five-artist lineup as eclectic as the Austrian capital itself.

In the text accompanying her display, Ohnemus cited Einstein as a riposte to congealing and streamlining identities, advocating instead for using such structures to enable internal difference, uncertainty and open-endedness. The exhibition was designed as a sequence of pairs, most including an example from Bonnie Camplin’s extraordinarily varied oeuvre. This was no slick bourgeois cotillion with smiling couples making their entrance two by two at

the top of the stairs, but a collection of duos that was variously gory, uncanny, kitschy, and trashy. Vienna is Freud country, after all, and each work had its own dark subconscious: irreducible, but not for that reason hermetic.

The late Italian painter Salvo's escapist and unpeopled land- and cityscapes are like paintings afflicted with tuberculosis—moribund but seductive, in line with the nineteenth-century belief that the disease was a sort of aphrodisiac, rendering its victims more beautiful as they withered. *Paesaggio* (Landscape), 1983, showed trees blushing in the feverish light of a setting sun, while another work, *Lampioni* (Street Lamps), 1980, took us to an empty gray street fantastically bathed in colored light. The latter was paired with Camplin's *Marcus Brown*, 1988, two identical black-and-white photographs of a young person cradling a pineapple while smoking a cigarette. Despite the evident ridiculousness of its subject matter, and in tandem with Salvo's wistful swan song, there was a sad profundity to the very triviality of the images and their implicit intimacy. A sense of loss emerged in this pairing, but still, together the works conveyed something like the stuff of life.

There was a certain melancholy to Amelie von Wulffen's strange paintings as well, even if it was persistently undercut by the artist's predilection for cliché. Hers is a fairy-tale world of gloomy children and unhappy endings so farcical as to be almost silly—but only almost, and that *almost* is everything. The hazy woman in a graveyard in von Wulffen's *Untitled*, 2014, kept company with Camplin's full-on silly gouache drawing of a caveman with a club and an ikea-style chair, *Cerne Abbas Giant!*, 2018. But her Wednesday Addams eyes were evidently not drawn to the troglodyte's primordial erection. Rather, she seemed to gaze at Mathis Altmann's haunted-house sculptures on the floor nearby.

Altmann's works here amounted to a show within the show, a dramatization of the penchant for fantasy, theatricality, and alternate realities that characterized most of the works on display. *The Bleeding Edge*, 2018, was a wrecked dollhouse propped up on wooden sticks, complete with lightning-bolt

wallpaper and red Christmas lights. It made for a cartoonish variant of what the glass box full of mundane mess titled *Retail, Restaurant, Gallery, Living*, 2018, staged with dry realism: urban life's unglamorous clutter. Altmann's contributions were the only ones that were not presented alongside Camplin; they evoked a pair of freaky twins—two gnarly brains, opened up and placed on plinths.

Inside the various worlds Ohnemus set up for us, a different kind of time seemed to be at work: When was the time of von Wulffen's eerie domesticity, or Salvo's eternal sunset? The beauty of the show's tight, repetitive structure was that it created a nonlinear, nonprogressive temporality. Its pairings like waves hitting the shore—each one both the same and different—the exhibition did not move forward but simply went on, expanding temporally. This rhythmic simplicity allowed space for the complex functions named by Einstein to develop between the works: dark, jagged, and genuinely bizarre.

—Kristian Vistrup Madsen