“POLYCHROME CLAUSTROPHOBIA, AN ESSAY ON KARIN KNEFFEL’S PORTRAITURE” BY CHRIS HAYES

“When I paint, I always paint with what already exists against what already exists.”

Words By Chris Hayes

A promotional image accompanying Karin Kneffel’s latest exhibition, ‘Face of a Woman, Head of a Child’ at Gagosian in Rome, shows a painting mid-construction. We see the artist sitting in front of the canvas with a brush in her hand, and before her a child’s head is almost complete. Every aspect of the child’s face is blocked in except for the head; a sharp aquamarine basecoat pops out, with light markings denoting the texture of the hair and forehead. Contrasted by the soft focus of the cheek and lips, the smooth line of the shadow along the shoulder, a gentle glow of light on the back of the neck, a slip of clothing fading almost out of view on the edge of the canvas, Kneffel brings together a multitude of visual conventions in the one image, simultaneously shifting across the history of painting, the logic of photography and the texture of digital images.

Kneffel’s source material is not exactly depictions of sacred figures from the early Renaissance. More precisely, her paintings are based on cropped photographs of the sculptures of a Madonna and Child, a personal curiosity she has explored on numerous research trips to churches and museums over Europe, including Germany, Italy, Portugal, former Czechoslovakia and Romania. Little of this information is present in the work. There is no reference to the site, location or time period, and identifying details such as halos, veils, and so on have been removed. What remains is the weight of history implied by genre and careful painterly attention to surface. After all, as the artist explains, “images come from other images.”



KARIN KNEFFEL, Untitled, 2021, Oil on canvas, in two parts, 47 1/4 x 39 3/8 inches, 120 x 100 cm © Karin Kneffel, Courtesy the artist and Gagosian

Portraiture is new ground for the painter. Although her previous works, psychically-charged, acidic and uncanny interior scenes, unsettlingly anthropomorphic depictions of animals, seductive still lifes, could hardly be described as being without the presence of people. Loaded with detail and mimicking the HD verisimilitude of photography, the claim of realism hangs anxiously around her practice. But numerous subtle choices around the palette, composition and moments of intervention on the surface confirms the construction and artifice that makes them possible. It’s possible to read similarities between the surface of skin depicted here and her early paintings of fruit. The result is a distinctly modern interpretation of archetypal religious imagery – tightly cropped faces, faithfully rendered distortions of a camera’s lens, and at times, a hallucinogenic expression on the figures.



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Some of this is personal to the artist. She describes becoming a grandmother just before the pandemic. Time in isolation, in the studio with her paintings, her family album and archive of research images, prompted deeper reflection on her relationship with motherhood. Time is an especially pronounced consideration for Kneffel as a painter, too. The work is slow, “oil paint can be a precise and unforgiving technology” she explains, and each painting is constructed through the steady application of layer upon layer. Paintings are made one after another, “from beginning to end, giving it my full attention” and without the aid of an assistant. A series of her works, therefore, mark not just a collection of paintings, but a durational exercise, a succession of thought and feeling.

When people first see images of Renaissance sculptures, they often remark on how awkward the depiction is. The eyes are a little uneven, the face too elongated. (Contemporary viewers, particularly younger people, might recall the mid-noughties almost-but-not-quite rendering of faces and skin textures of video game graphics.) Their charming weirdness marks a transition point in art history, one which Kneffel appears keen to push further. The artist used image editing software to experiment with the scale of the original photographs. Cropping out details placed greater emphasis on the rough surface of the aged wood, which was additionally exaggerated by the slight blur of a photographic image. And perhaps most importantly, by separating the woman from the child, placing them on equal scale on separate canvas, dislocating the gaze of the original sculpture, a dramatic reconfiguration of the image unsettles the emotional subtext.



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Artifice, a playful approach to tropes, references within references, the ethos that guides Kneffel’s is more cinematic than postmodern, although her paintings are certainly adjacent to a lineage of others who took painting’s claustrophobic baggage and fictive nature as a starting point. Her career begins amongst other German painters who came to prominence in the late twentieth century, studying under Gerhard Richter before taking on professorships in Bremen and Munich. Her subject matter flirts with kitsch; it’s difficult to paint fruit, interiors and faces because so many have done it already. Yet, so much else precedes us too and shapes what it means to be alive: history, gender, religion, familial bonds. Painting is inevitably about the interplay of artist and viewer, material and context. As Kneffel, in a conversation with theorist Sunil Manghani, once explained: “When I paint, I always paint with what already exists against what already exists.”

Face of a Woman, Head of a Child runs from November 11, 2022 – January 14, 2023 at Gagosian Rome.

Chris Hayes is a writer based between Ireland and the UK.



KARIN KNEFFEL, Face of a Woman, Head of a Child, 2022, installation view, Photo: Matteo D'Eletto M3 Studio, Courtesy Gagosian

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