Come in, Look out: Karin Kneffel showcases at MKM's 25th Anniversary

Serena Pacchiani

Last Updated: 2 August 2024 2:54 Pm



Credit: herzogdemeuron

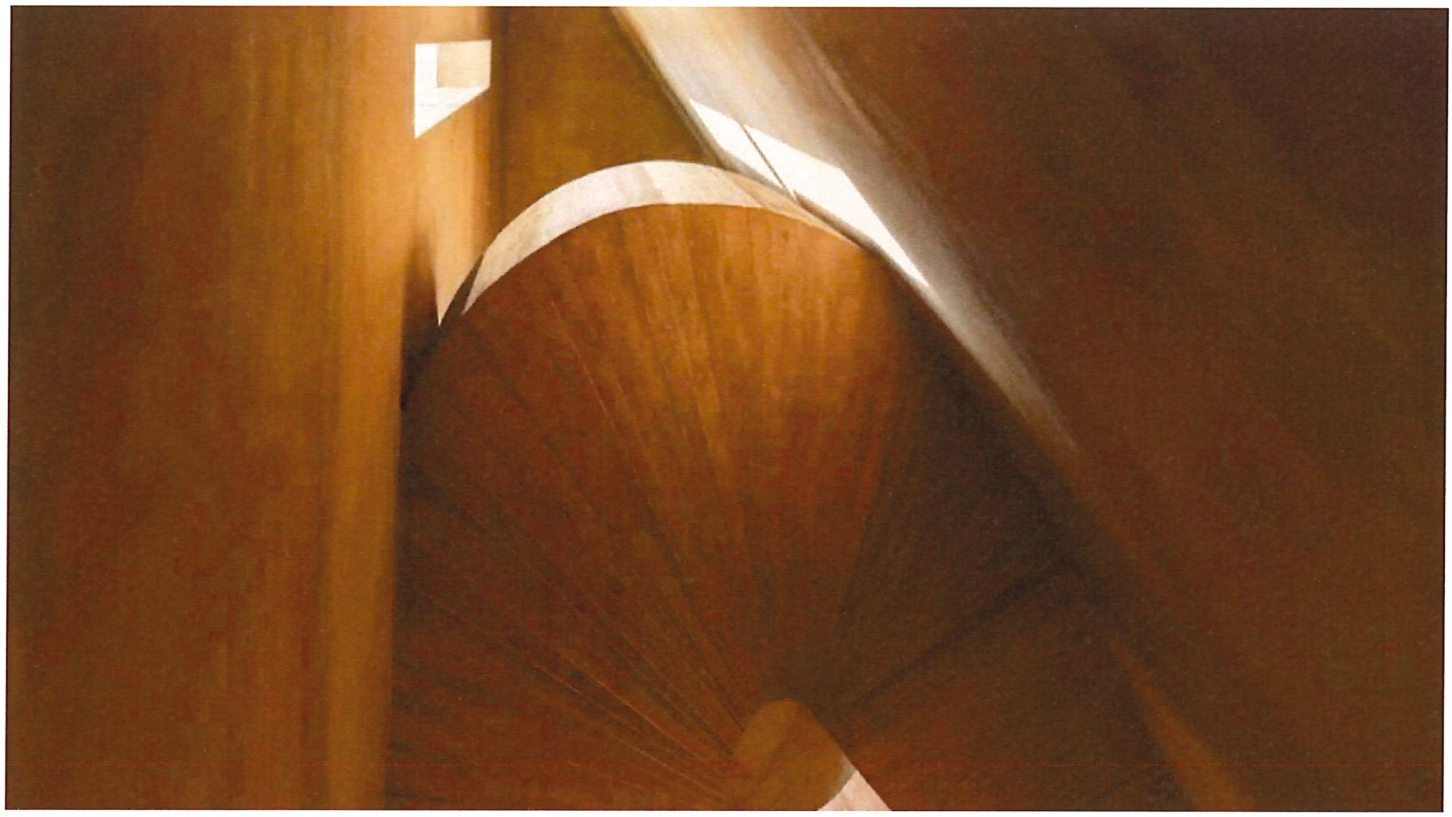
At the MKM Museum in Duisburg, an exhibition curated by Kay Heymer and open until 1st September

Not far from Düsseldorf and Wuppertal, home of Pina Bausch and her famous *Tanztheater*, the **Museum Küppersmühle (MKM)** in Duisburg stands as a testament to the transformative power of art and architecture in urban renewal. This former grain mill, nestled in the heart of the Ruhr region, has evolved into a pivotal institution for contemporary art.

The MKM represents also a key element in Duisburg's urban plan renewal, conceived by Norman Foster's acclaimed architectural firm in 1994, very much known in Germany for his iconic landmarks like the Berlin Reichstag. Foster's vision aimed to transform Duisburg's post-industrial landscape into a dynamic, contemporary cityscape, mirroring his innovative work on a global scale and breathing new life into the city's cultural and architectural identity.

A Beacon of Urban Renewal: The MKM and Its Architectural Evolution

Celebrating its 25th anniversary this year, the MKM's journey began with its transformation in 1999 by the Swiss architect duo Herzog & de Meuron, who masterfully converted the industrial space into a cultural hub. Its transformation from a factory relic to a cultural beacon exemplifies the transformative power of adaptive reuse in urban renewal. Herzog & de Meuron's original metamorphosis of the MKM preserved its industrial essence, setting a benchmark for cultural spaces in post-industrial areas. Herzog & de Meuron's expansion, completed in 2021, seamlessly integrates with their original conversion, ingeniously incorporating the existing mill silos into the design. The extension visibly emerges where the silos end, creating a shocking and nevertheless, harmonious transition. By masterfully blending the site's industrial heritage with contemporary design, the expanded museum solidifies its status as a world-class art institution, exemplifying the potential of adaptive reuse in cultural transformations.



—— The MKM Museum credit H&dM

Also, the collection stands as a veritable testament to the evolution of contemporary German art. When it is pointed out that walking through the museum is like entering a kind of Germanic art history book, the MKM director Dr. Walter Smerling nods proudly. Credit for this elegance and coherence lies with the Ströher family, whose collection spans from the early experiments of Art Informel to the Neo-Expressionist movement of the 1980s. The Ströher acquisitions showcase seminal works that mirror post-war Germany's social and political evolution, featuring renowned artists such as Josef Albers, Georg Baselitz, Sigmar Polke, and Gerhard Richter (Dresden, 1932). Richter's influence, in particular, resonates beyond his works, extending to his former students and shaping subsequent generations of artists, such as Karin Kneffel (class of 1957 from the Ruhr region).

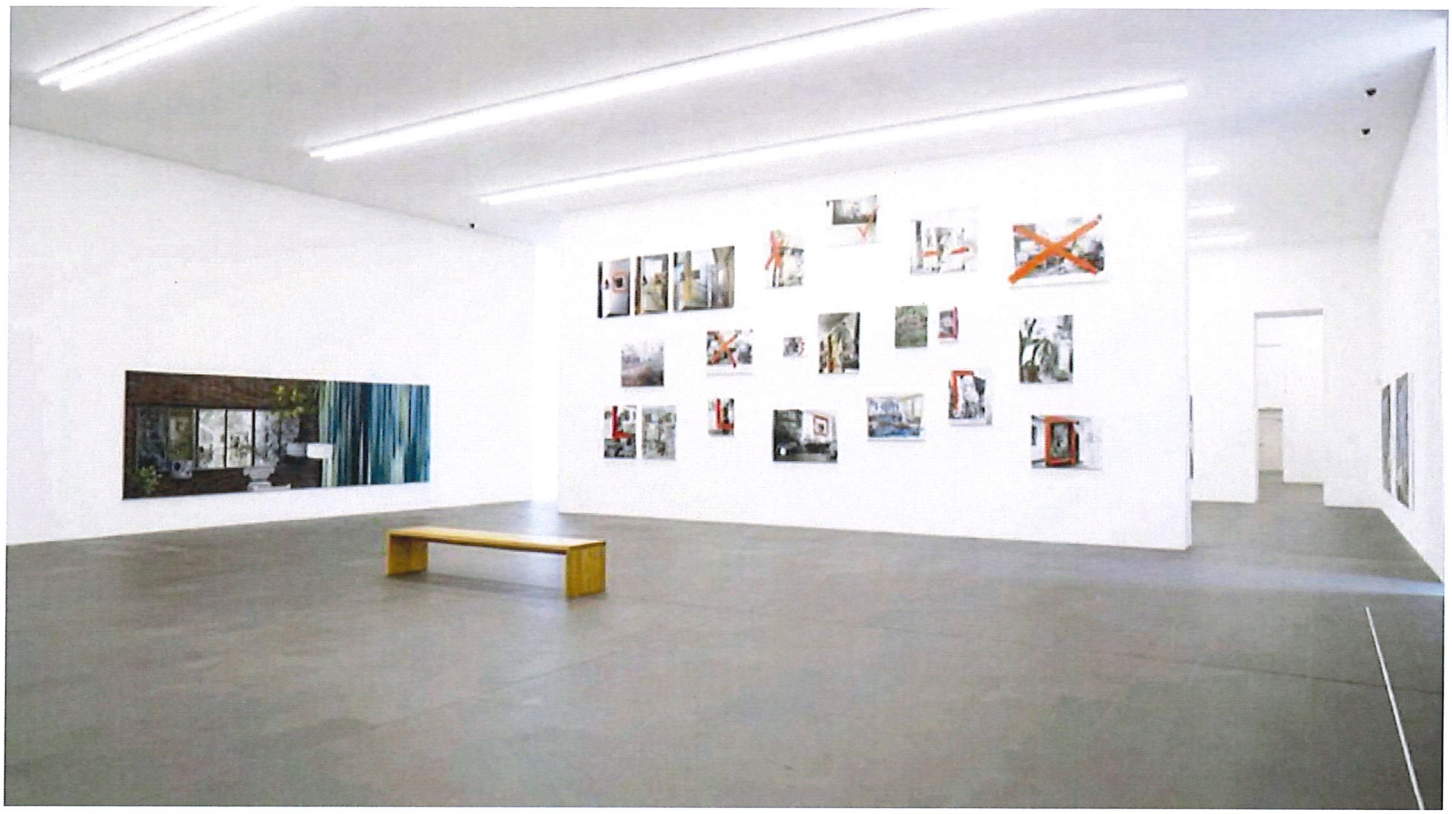
Karin Kneffel "Come in, Look out" : bridging Classical Techniques with Modern Sensibilities

To mark its 25th anniversary, the MKM presents, until the 1st of September 2024, **"Come in, Look out"**, a compelling exhibition by Karin Kneffel.

Former student of Gerhard Richter, with a solid international reputation, as well as her uncountable number of exhibitions behind, her solo exhibition epitomizes the museum's dedication to art, featuring a huge selection of over 70 paintings and a curated selection of watercolours in a dedicated space.

Kneffel's oeuvre deftly bridges classical painting techniques – her absolute favourites – with modern sensibilities, distinguished by its painstaking precision and a captivating fusion of quotidian familiarity and enigmatic allure.

The exhibition charts her artistic and intellectual odyssey from hyper-realistic detail to nuanced explorations of interiors, architectural forms, and most recently, portraiture. Through this comprehensive display, visitors have the opportunity to witness the evolution of Kneffel's distinctive visual "obsessions", one that both honours and transcends the influence of her mentor, or other possible influences and winks to hyperrealism and surrealism, offering a mesmerizing experience.

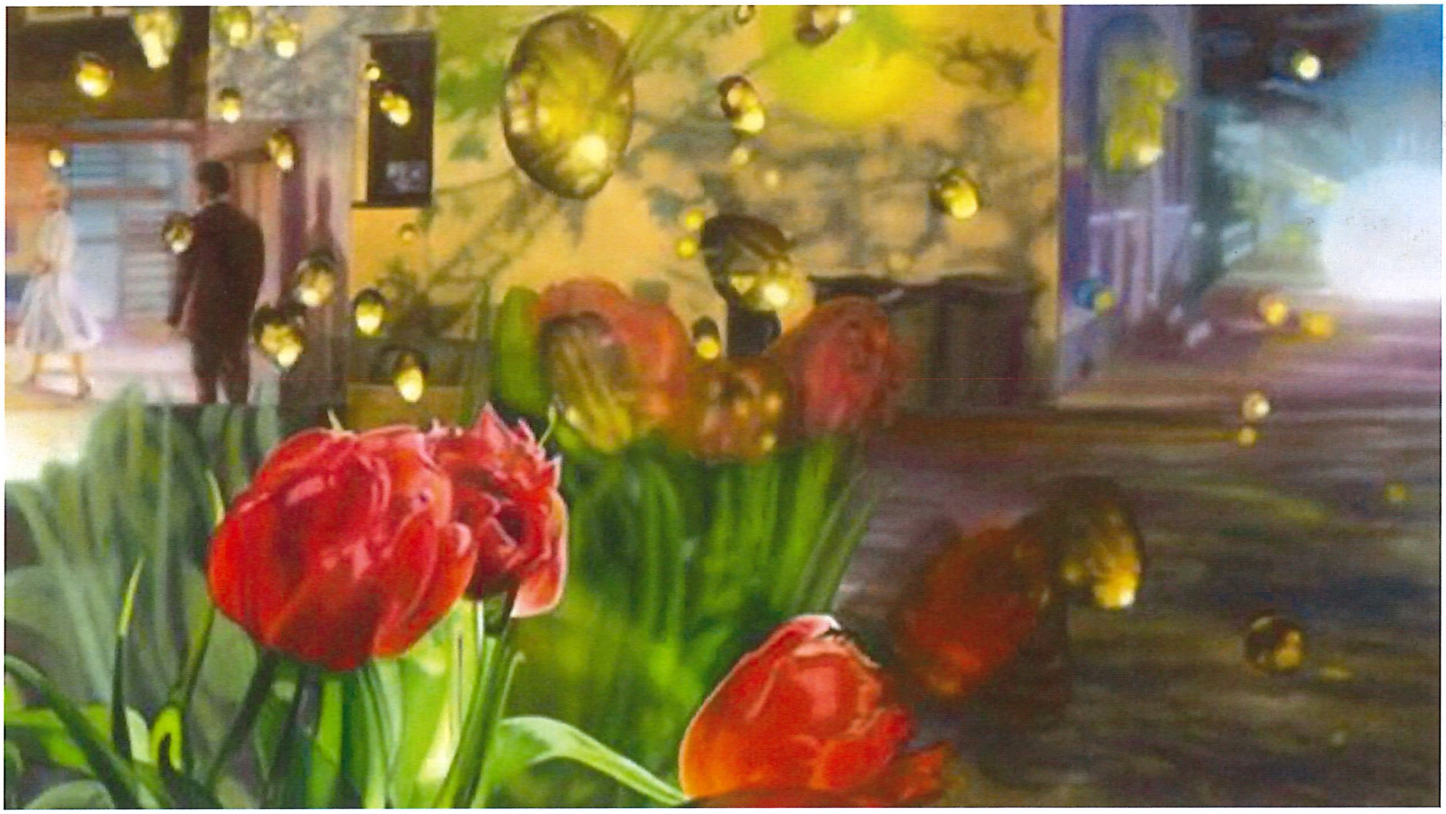


credit MKM, Karin Kneffel Exhibition Come in Look out

Exploring Perception: The Intersection of Painting, Photography, and Architecture

One of Karin Kneffel's obsessions seems the exploration of the interplay between painting, photography, and architecture. exemplified in her works inspired by Mies van der Rohe's – another distinguished German – iconic structures. In 2009, Kneffel began a series focused on *Mies's Farnsworth House (The Edith Farnsworth House, 1945-1951)*. Inspired by original photographs as a starting point, she created paintings that blur the lines between reality and reflection. She manipulated perspective and light, incorporating raindrops and condensation on glass surfaces to create layers of visual complexity. This approach challenged viewers' perceptions of interior and exterior spaces, while also commenting on the relationship between modernist architecture and nature.

Building on this theme, Kneffel's 2014 project for the Barcelona Pavilion further developed her engagement and reflection on Mies's architecture. Here, she created two large-scale oil paintings that juxtapose the pavilion's 1929 original form with its 1980s reconstruction. By referencing both historical black-and-white photographs and the contemporary structure, Kneffel's work became a meditation on time, memory, and the evolving nature of architectural spaces. Her paintings incorporated reflections, mirrored surfaces, and subtle human elements, inviting viewers to consider the complex relationship between photographic documentation, painted representation, and lived architectural experience.



—— Karin Kneffel, *Untitled*, 2021, photo: Ivo Faber, Gagosian Gallery

From photorealistic detail to portraiture

Furthermore, the artist's approach to painting is deeply rooted in the tradition of central perspective, a technique fundamental to Western art since the Renaissance. However, Kneffel employs this method in innovative ways, creating complex visual experiences that play with spatiality, reflections, and perception. Her work often features everyday objects, interiors, and landscapes viewed through glass surfaces, creating layers of reflection and refraction that challenge the viewer's understanding of space and reality.

One of the most striking aspects of Kneffel's work is her manipulation of scale. By enlarging everyday objects to monumental proportions, she invites viewers to reconsider their relationship with the familiar. A strawberry or a grape bunch might fill an entire canvas, its minute details rendered with extraordinary precision, forcing the viewer to engage with the object in an entirely new way. This play with scale not only showcases Kneffel's technical prowess but also serves as a commentary on perception and the nature of reality.

Her recent artistic evolution has led her into the realm of portraiture, focusing on depictions of women and children. This new series, often inspired by historical sculptures, marks a significant shift in her oeuvre. Her innovative process involves photographing sculptures and then translating these images into paintings, creating a multi-layered interpretive journey from three-dimensional form to two-dimensional representation. By transforming sculptural subjects into painted form, Kneffel invites viewers to contemplate the phenomenological nature of representation and perception, questioning how likeness and essence are captured across different media.

Kneffel way of painting demonstrates that even in an era of digital oversaturation, traditionally created artworks can still captivate audiences. With her unique approach, her style combines representational plausibility with artificiality, updating classical techniques. She may have more questions than answers – as Kneffel herself uses to say – but her methodology opens up a world of multifaceted visual experiences, ever-expanding and endlessly intriguing.