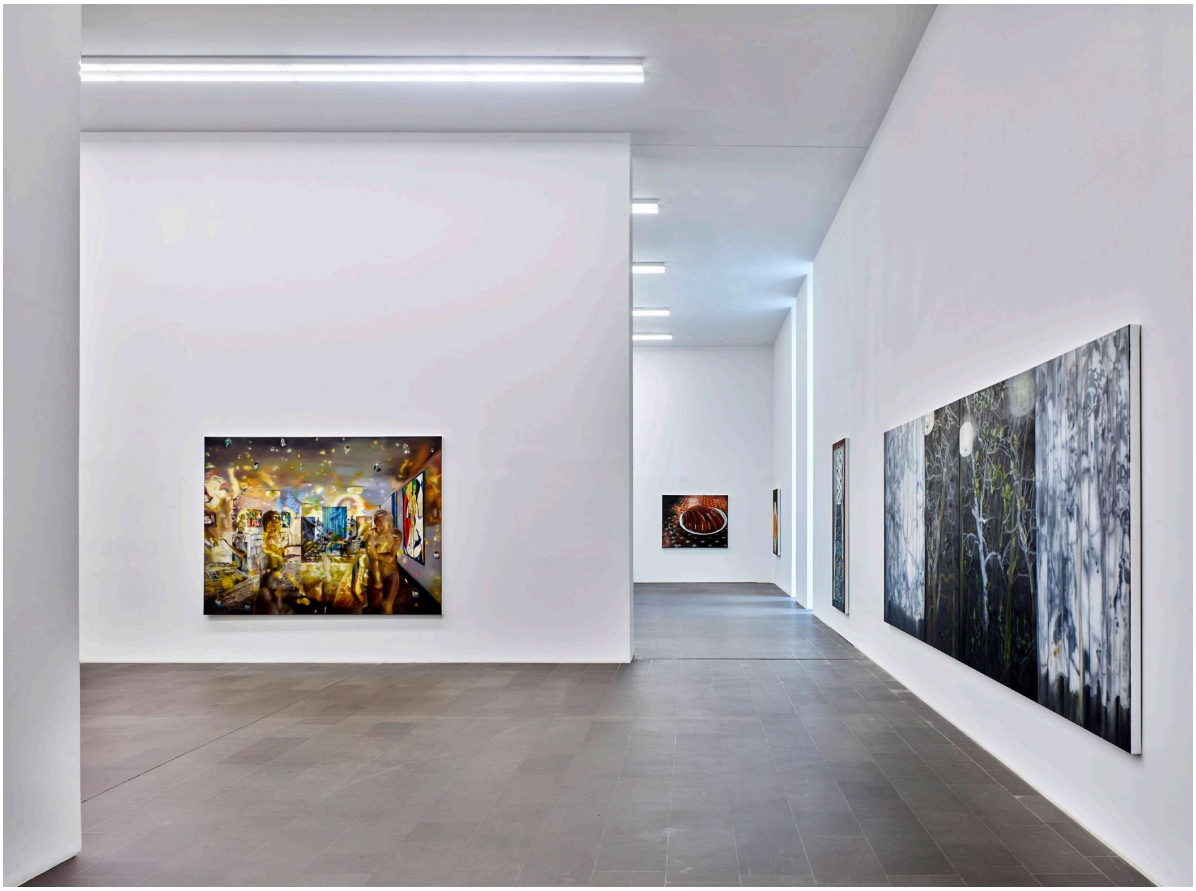
INTERVIEW





KARIN KNEFFEL

MUSEUM KÜPPERSMÜHLE, DUISBURG

PHAINOMENON

- RAJESH PUNJ

When you look at a painting are you facing the world or with your back to it, and by choosing one reality over another, is it that what is in front of you offers a greater sense of the real? In his day Italian filmmaker Federico Fellini, saw realism as less black and white but more fluid, claiming it as an impossible category; saying 'In a sense everything is realistic, I see no line between the imagery and the real'. That looseness of the dream-like and the definite coexisting takes us into the world and work of German painter Karin Kneffel. Whose paintings address the condition of seeing, situating her subjects at the centre of various imagined and make-believe scenarios, that are intended to influence, and interfere even, with what we are looking at. By camouflaging a clear view into her paintings, Kneffel propositions that whatever we look at exists within a framework of many other things, as the significance of what has been painted is placed against

^ Installation View, Karin Kneffel – Come in, Look out, MKM Museum Küppersmühle für Moderne Kunst, 2024, Photo ©Achim Kukulies, Düsseldorf

< Karin Kneffel, Untitled, 1998
Oil on canvas, 300 x 200 cm
Kunststiftung DZ Bank, Düsseldorf
©Karin Kneffel / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2024

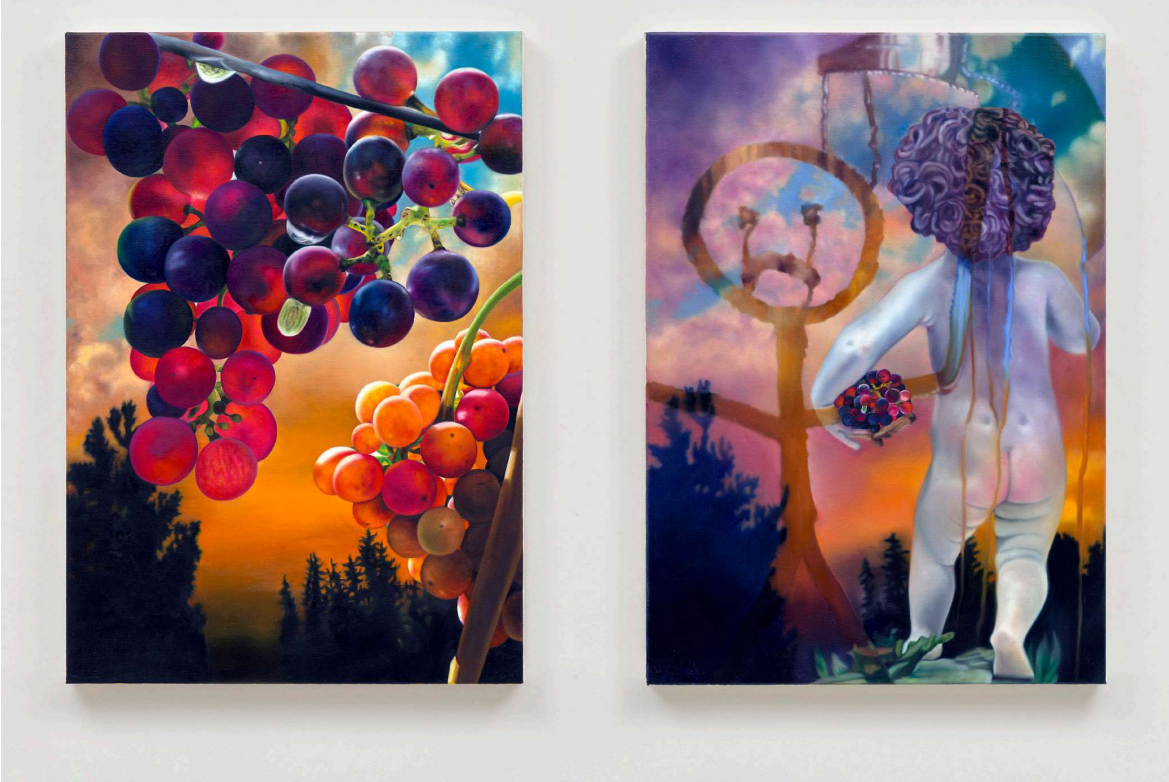


the extraordinariness of the ordinary. Postmodern in her approach, Kneffel appears less interested in isolating what is in front of her, in a volume of empty space, as the Dutch and German Old Masters would have done – they who painted their visions of the world but wanted to see them devoid of it – instead the artist invites everything to enter into the frame, as it has a habit of doing in reality; to create, as she sees it, its own set of problems. Influenced by the creative candour of her mentor Gerhard Richter, Kneffel's still lives appear ready to topple over, the window view clouding out the composition, the rain having dampened against the outside walls, and the interior coming in on the subject.

By reintroducing the world back into her paintings, Kneffel wants that nothing is of greater importance and that there is merit in looking at everything in the context of how we experience it – of being dispassionate and less devotional. Given the forensic finish of Kneffel's paintings, that what we look at has been laboured over for many months, they are not intended as polaroid pictures, instant and obvious to one's sense of reality, but present something more surreal, as the props of her paintings resonate like those on a film set or the collateral from a crime scene. Toying with what it is to gaze at everything around us, with our own eyes and those of a stranger, to look at the world anew. And just as Austrian-born Art Historian Ernst Gombrich argued of the painter's enquiries 'not being about the physical world, but of the nature of our reaction to it', so Kneffel insists upon creating 'doubt' around the certainty of everything she paints. In a matter similar to German sculptor and photographer Thomas Demand, whose pursuit of the real leads to his creating on paper perfect versions of the truth, that when photographed are more convincing than reality itself. In contrast, Kneffel's paintings offer the audience obvious signs of her authorship, as like (Gerhard) Richter, after painstakingly creating a convincing scene, she is at liberty to paint over it, to bring us back to within the painting's parameters, to want to parody the painterly process; as a way of successfully sabotaging the very act of representation itself.

Richter would himself declare a painting's limitations, talking about the strength of the photograph over the painting, arguing 'the photograph is the only picture that can truly convey information,' going on to say that 'a painting of a murder is of no interest whatsoever; but a photograph of a murder fascinates everyone'. This rightly proves as profound as it is problematic because he confirms that what a painting is, isn't the same as photography, and as with Kneffel's work, it is not to give us the real but to make sense and manipulate reality, whilst adding so much of oneself to the picture.

^ Karin Kneffel, Untitled, 2001, Oil on canvas, 200 x 300cm, Private collection ©Karin Kneffel / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2024



^ *Karin Kneffel, Untitled, 2023, Oil on canvas, 2 parts, 100 x 70 cm (each), Schönewald Fine Art, Düsseldorf*
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Interview

Rajesh Punj (RP): I want to begin by asking about the references in the paintings, and also the layering of imagery. There's a sense that even though the images are flat, the paintings are multi-dimensional, with different situations or scenarios to every 'storyboard' image. In the adjoining room, you have a wonderful painting Untitled 2014, of the interior of Mies van der Rohe's Barcelona pavilion, which you appear to have layered on a film still, that you play with again and again in other works, from a late 1940's/1950's film; the name of which I wanted to ask you of. So, I am curious about this kind of image importing on the surface of the canvas, and for you to begin to explain it.

Karin Kneffel (KK): I borrow from the 1950 film Harvey, with James Steward, a comedy.

RP: I see the same scene of a man falling and landing flat on his front throughout the exhibition.

Kay Heymar (KH): Karin's work often introduces people in the paintings, and usually she takes them from photographs from sequences, and the stumbling man from the film Harvey is one of those.

KK: James Stewart plays the private investigator, and he is seen walking down a corridor, suddenly he stumbles because the cleaner has just cleaned the floor, and so I wanted to capture that sequence of his falling over, from which I have also created a series of watercolours, where you can see the scene unfolding in front of you, and the painting intended to capture something of that, but the reference isn't intended to be specific to anything, that isn't the point in the painting. I was also interested in the woman interrupted as she cleans the floor by Steward's character which leads to his falling flat on his face. I saw it as an opportunity to understand how this cleaning lady looks at art, as she has an entirely different perspective and looks at everything with fresh eyes.

RP: The painting offers very multiple views, as though jumping television channels.

KH: Karin is an artist from the generation that many people have since called postmodern, and there was this trend in postmodern art in the mid to late 1980s, where many artists were using quotations for instance, like Sherrie Levine. Karin is original because she paints interiors, which are based on a lot of research that she's done, creating her paintings from old black and white photographs, for instance, the apartment of Esther's family who were prominent art collectors.



Karin identified those original images, their lives, as the inspiration for her painting, as a process of research, specifically a painting photographed in the living room. To go to the current owner of the work, a museum, to see the original work to colourise it from the black and white photograph.

Because she didn't want to invent them but use the actual colours, and as a way of dealing with quoted images everything is well thought through and very original in that sense, and it is not about quotation per se; but for her, the elements in her paintings have to be convincing; ultimately, they have to appear as correct. Sometimes you have an element, for instance, you can see a large Eric Fischl painting in the background of one of the paintings. The story of that is quite important because the American painter produced a project at the Clyfford Still Museum, and he hired two actors who reenacted scenes in the museum. Karin went on to make paintings after he had photographed the performance, and one of the paintings shows two elderly men standing to the left and a woman sitting at the table. In the background, there were artworks installed in the scene, and so Fischl's actions were very inspiring for Karin, making a painting as a homage to that show, these different layers are sometimes difficult to decipher for the audience, making it more complex and more compelling. That for me is very interesting.

RP: There's a definite sense of history in the images, of design history, the Mies van der Rohe reference proves interesting, because of what we know of the pavilion from reproductions. You have also talked about Bruce Nauman and Gerhard Richter. So there is this incredible sense of cultural history coming into and out of the works, together with how we see and experience, and of our memory becoming enmeshed. In terms of looking, you appear to lead us into the painting, as the detail of the floor, the reflective walls, and the bookshelves, are evidence of everything you have looked at, thought very intensely about and recreated. Such references introduce a historical depth, which is fascinating.

KH: There is a relationship between film and painting, and of course the crucial subject is timing, but also the camera. I mean if you have a photograph you take a picture and it's a matter of a fraction of a second that the image is captured by the small machine you have in your hand, and if you as a painter can recreate the same scene takes a longer amount of time because you have to create and paint in all the details. In film, you have a sequence of images, that are filled, and other important scenes are often slowed down.

KK: What is the English for that?

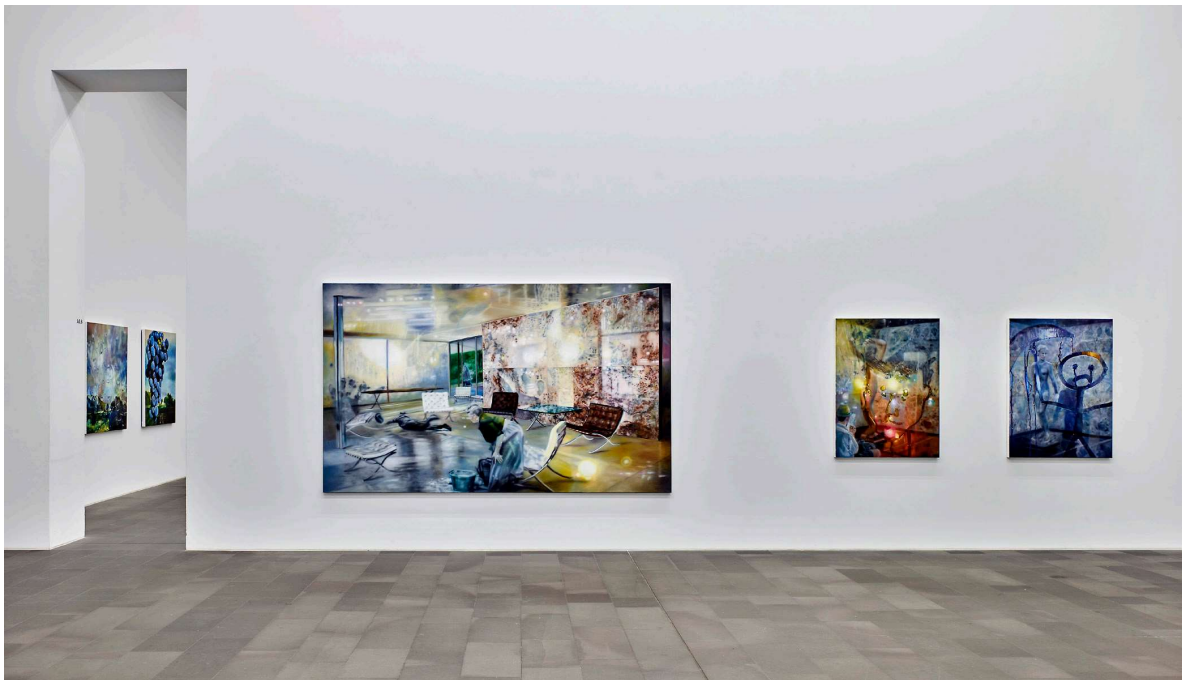
KH: 'Slow motion' - slow motion is an important distinction because its approach is the same as that of the painter. The painter is looking at many things simultaneously, and in the next room, there is a work where you can see what the camera is taking a picture of. Of course, it reflects filmmaking by painterly means, which dramatically slows it down, because it's so much slower. It takes a month to make a painting that captures a moment that a camera takes a fraction of a second, two seconds to take. This discrepancy, between the fast and slow of the image, is very interesting and is something I think has been crucial in art historically.

^ Karin Kneffel, Untitled, 2009, Oil on canvas, Three parts, 180 x 520 cm, Kunstmuseen Krefeld ©Karin Kneffel / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2024



^ *Karin Kneffel, Untitled, 2021, Oil on canvas, 180 x 150 cm*
Private collection ©Karin Kneffel / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2024

A reflection of time has always been crucial for many artists, David Hockney made a subject out of that because he tried to escape from a central perspective to create gestural paintings that involve the hand, and of course, he painted the now famous splash painting, by the swimming pool ready to splash and he was to have said that it happened in a matter of seconds but was painted over three months. The difference is a big challenge for many painters, and so where Hockney departed from it, to go more painterly. I



think Karen's work embraces duration and makes something sensational out of it, which is fascinating because very few painters have managed to do that, especially in such a reflective way, because Karin is aware of what she is doing, and what the implications are to the final image; which is outstanding.

RP: It is interesting how everything comes together on the canvas, regarding the representation of time. We understand the modern world, especially through social media and how we receive imagery is unrelenting and can be incessant. I interviewed Luc Tuymans at his studio in recent years, and in his newer works, he introduces iPhone apps to the base of his paintings, to go some way to acknowledge how we see and receive so much of our imagery. What is interesting is the speed at which we receive information now, and the fact that, as a painter, you dedicate yourself to a detail that can take weeks and weeks that we have absorbed in an instance. That you concentrate on what you care very little for after you see and experience it.

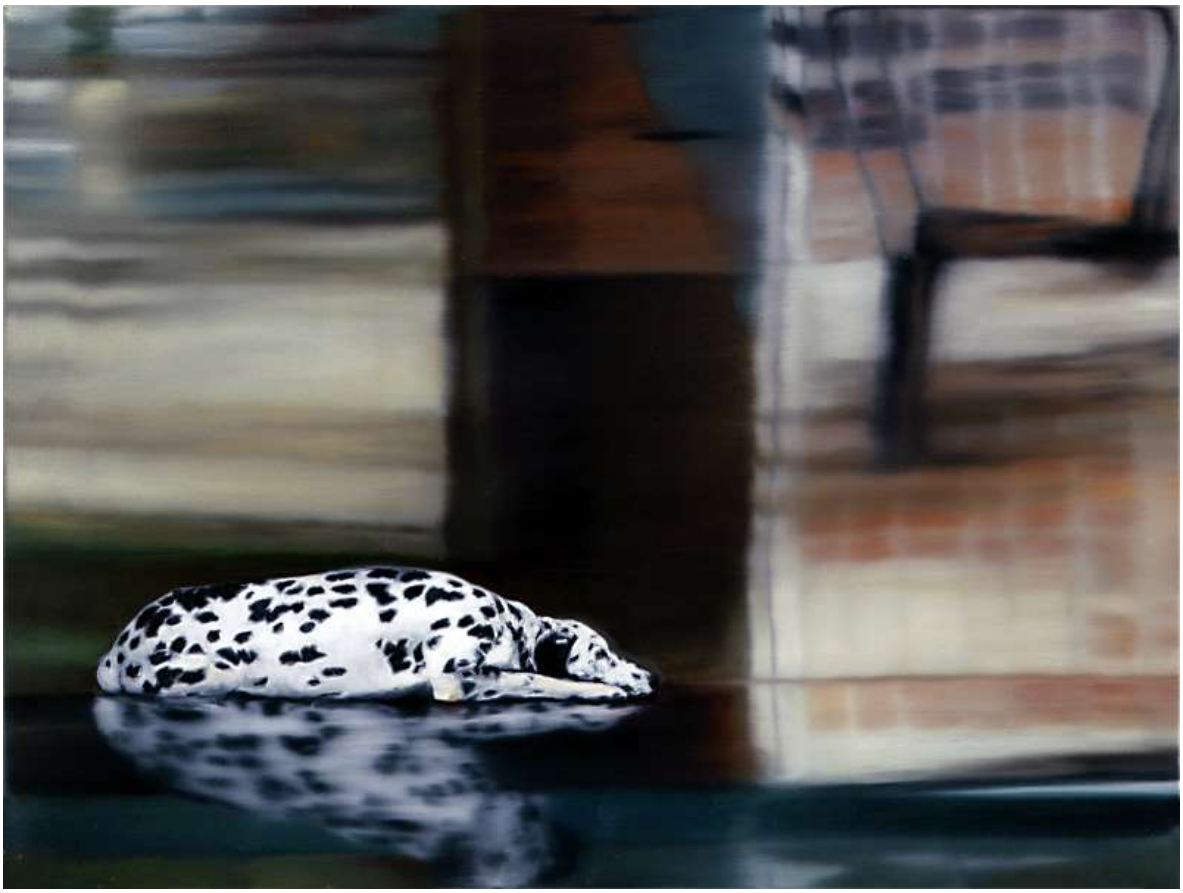
KH: That is the big qualitative painting, it can slow down time and emphasise aspects of what surrounds us, taking longer to deal with than it takes us to see the image. Of the fleeting of time as it stops at significant moments. The painter makes visible things that are important to take in, and therefore her art attempts to escape the consequence of time, wanting instead to be timeless in a perfect world. The greatest works of art are timeless because they retain a certain energy and freshness. Especially because the painter was capable of syncing a moment or a scene that has the power to extend beyond itself it doesn't distinguish.

KK: I like painting that you can look at for as long as you want. You can look for seconds or longer, minutes, as long as you want; if you have a film or video you have to sit for ten or twenty minutes, from its beginning to its end, whereas the painting has no beginning, middle or end. You can decide where you start, the top coming down, or from the right corner or straight into the middle, and painting shows you everything at once, as in every layer you see, you see everything in the opening moment. Starting and ending once, you see everything, and you can decide where you want to go and how long you want to look at it, so you have a lot of freedom when you look at paintings.

KH: An audience can be very generous with their time, because I feel I give them a lot of my time, and that is specific to this medium of creating and capturing images, and that takes a lot of time, even if the initial execution might take only seconds. The process of arriving at a certain image is usually very long, and therefore the audience's time is essential to their appreciation of the work.

RP: The other thing that interests me when talking about time, is the truth in a painting, and how 'real' your paintings are for their perfect imagery. An example is that you can be looking at an image of a lush landscape, and then you see a window covered with raindrops that interrupt the view, so our perspective and position change from outside to in.

^ Installation View, Karin Kneffel – Come in, Look out, MKM Museum Küppersmühle für Moderne Kunst, 2024, Photo ©Achim Kukulies, Düsseldorf



Is it that I'm standing at the window? Am I looking at the landscape from a room, and whose room am I in, as I look out onto the landscape? And so, there is this wonderful conundrum to the canvas. Many layers have us wondering where we are, and what we are doing there. What is the truth to what I am looking at? The paintings offer us a greater sense of the real, that has the best of everything.

KK: That could be the case.

RP: It interests me to try to understand.

KH: To convey that feeling it is important to paint in a very plausible way. So, everything you see appears truthful, because it looks convincing, just as a magazine advertises and promotes particular products, everything has to appear very well executed, for it to be believable. And of course, the same is true of different moulds, which tells you that it is not really about the reality of the recipe, but it is a proposal that could very well be real. But then it is also your task to decide whether to accept it as important. There's a wonderful painting of the dog, which is mirrored on the dining room floor, and the dog and its reflection have the dog's head raised, and the actual dog is sleeping.

KK: The painter has the possibility of making a plausible image, and the audience can decide what is real.

RP: Is it all an illusion?

KK: It is always difficult for me to say I'm a realistic painter, that's because nothing is real.

RP: It is interesting if we think historically about the notion of the painting representing reality and decide at a certain moment with post-modernism, that the real becomes somewhat irrelevant.

KH: With the emergence of post-modernism any image, whether a photograph, a painting or whatever else, and the accuracy of what was being looked at disappeared. You could say it was fabricated, no longer trusting anything you see, and once we had that as a positive experience, it was about dealing with the dilemma. I think a productive work of art touches upon that issue very well, and of course, current paintings are convincing in a profane

^ Karin Kneffel, Untitled, 2021, Inv. No. 2008/20, 60 x 80 cm
Private collection, ©Karin Kneffel / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2024



realistic sense, but there's always a twist to them. This hints at the fact that we never have a real image, it is always artificial, and the tradition of artists has always been about being close to nature itself, and its representation. In that case, we have to consider what surrounds this difference. It has always been there, and it is now more important than ever.

RP: Another of the untitled works from 2010, is a wonderfully complex painting of an audience looking at (Diego) Velázquez's Las Meninas, which invites us to think about the condition of looking, with your inclusion of telephone and ticket holders amassing on the painting, which brilliantly introduces the complexity of the modern experience. About how we see and receive a painting at an exhibition. We can go to the Louvre, Paris, or the Prado, Madrid, and we often compete with a thousand others with their cameras. So, it becomes interesting to consider those conditions as a measure of how we experience art, more conveniently through an art book, where we see the image at our leisure, uninterrupted for as long as we desire. The painting captures that, like Thomas Struth, of seeing a painting as it is seen.

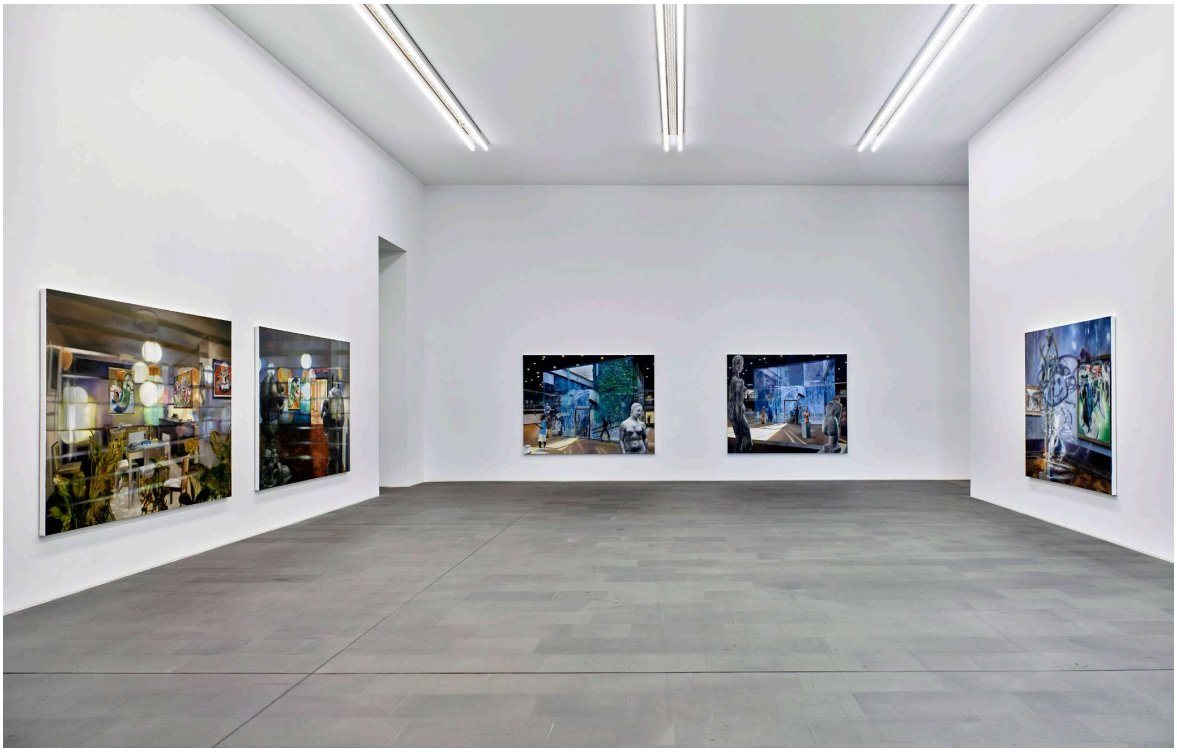
KK: There are many layers you have to get lost in, as a reflection of various stages of reality, because in Velázquez's painting, you can see the painter standing close to his canvas, with his subjects on his side of the painting and not behind it, as you would expect.

KH: The couple that appear in the mirror, are likely King Philip IV and Queen Mariana.

RP: Mirrored but not intended for the painting and with your painting, for its complexity and visual comedy, it examines the 'condition of seeing' that I refer to, that gives us, the second or third audience if you like, a second layer, of a painting's place in history, and its relationship to an audience; something that Struth captures in his photographs. To see a painting requires going to an art gallery, which is the same intention as someone else. That desire multiplied by a hundred means that we may only ever see a painting from a distance, of a foot of a figure, or else the sky that sits well above the painted protagonists. You paint that in, as recognition of our 'ways of seeing'. For all that, the painting appears intentionally confusing, as if not knowing what we are looking at is closer to how we experience so much of the real world. Your creating context, by giving what is in your painting an environment, brings us closer as much as it takes us further away from the truth. The other thing that I'm interested in is your schooling; you studied in Dusseldorf with Gerhard Richter. How important was that?

KK: It was important, a time when painting was declared dead. I was asked 'why am I painting?' I can remember I came to Gerhard Richter's painting class, and there were all these students looking at each other, convinced that 'painting was dead'; 'what should we do?' Richter told us. I don't know what to

^ Installation View, Karin Kneffel – Come in, Look out, MKM Museum Küppersmühle für Moderne Kunst, 2024, Photo ©Achim Kukulies, Düsseldorf



say to all of you; it was a depressing time. You have to understand, that it was all about new expression at the time, with artists like Georg Baselitz and Jorg Immendorff, who weren't concerned with realism, but wanted to revive expressive gesture by the use of figuration, propagated neo-Expressionism in the early 1980s. I remember in class we argued we didn't want to paint like that, but then I still saw some students fearing the still life, and introducing colour to the canvas, because they wanted it to appear modern or more minimal. So much of what was happening didn't allow us to express ourselves as we wanted; it proved a difficult moment to paint. And so, there were many (women) artists choosing other mediums, making videos and such things, because painting at that time was dominated entirely by men. We had male teachers, including Gerhard, Joseph Beuys, Nam June Paik and Gotthard Grauber. No women were teaching at the time, and for me, as a woman painter it proved impossible to do anything; to want to paint wasn't easy. Despite that, I thought, when I started painting, that the only chance I had was to paint what I liked and what was in front of me, as a protest to everything else that was happening at the time. I would paint what I wanted, when the simplest things would often become so difficult, with arguments about painting animals or fruit, and I can remember saying 'Why can't I paint fruit, I eat it? 'why not?

^ Installation View, Karin Kneffel – Come in, Look out, MKM Museum Küppersmühle für Moderne Kunst, 2024, Photo ©Achim Kukulies, Düsseldorf

Everything had changed, but we were still the same, we live, we die, we laugh, we have children, or we decide not to. It's always been the same so, and in the 1980s I tried to put everything to one side and be without the burden of art history. That's how it was, if you decided to paint in orange, you knew you had everything associated with that colour resting on your shoulders. I wanted to paint, that was the thing I could do best, and I wanted to create (painterly) problems for myself; that needed solving.

KH: I think you're constantly improving.

KK: Yes, of course, I continue to work on specific things, of how to paint the perspective of looking through a pane of glass, and when you consider it for the first time it's probably not as convincing as the fifteenth time, because by then you understand how the create the illusion of looking through something. Such an idea takes months of development. It's also reassuring that they are appreciated and that masterworks are not falling from the sky. When I was learning to paint, I was convinced I wouldn't have to do anything, and that a day would come when I would make this wonderful work; that day never came. Painting requires a great deal of thinking, and when I am in my studio, I am often convinced the paintings are talking to me when I'm creating them, and that when I'm in dialogue with the work a great deal more happens. A painting can tell me that that's too complicated for its pictorial space and requires something else. It is a constant conversation; with the painting invited to its surface.