• One of Karin Kneffel's paintings (Ill. p. 99) shows a tiger skin lying on a carpet. Its thick, soft materiality meets the even, short-haired structure of the carpet's surface. The painting appeals to the viewer's senses in its being limited to the two objects depicted as well as through its materiality and coloration. It seems almost as though a tactile stimulus were being activated – one would like to walk over this image with bare feet. This emphasis on the play of multiple surfaces is strengthened by the rapidly expanding ornament, like what is found in paintings by Matisse. A survey of the motifs is provided, but at the same time the viewer's gaze is pulled into an uncertain depth while his position is not clearly defined. The floral patterns appear both strangely familiar and unfamiliar. As interior design the carpet can be located in neither time nor style. As pure ornament, which seems to detach itself from the underground through its extreme contrast of the bright colors and deep black, it is reminiscent of psychedelic 60s patterns and advertising of the time – the vivid colors of the flowers used by Pril dish soap, for instance. It is beautiful, almost unbearably beautiful.

• Karin Kneffel's works are to be seen in the tradition of Aestheticism, in which perfection and decadence, the appealing appearance and the unsoundness of the world are inseparably linked. Should one attempt to examine the predator's remains more exactly, one is disconcertingly held in limbo: Is it a still life or is there still a bit of life left in the tiger? The animal's gaze seems to be aimed at the viewer's eyes, boring deep into them; the head collapses limply – it is not stuffed – seems deformed and thus has an unsettling effect. The pictorial descriptions in the most important, programmatic Aesthetic novel "À rebours" by Joris-Karl Huysmans from 1884 transport a very similar atmosphere to this Kneffel painting. In the book, Jean des Esseintes, the protagonist, flees society and constructs his own reality, purely from the composition of artificial or, as the case may be, artistic elements. "Looking one day at an Oriental carpet aglow with iridescent colours, and following with his eyes the silvery glints running across the weft of the wool, which was a combination of yellow and plum, he had thought

marion ackermann **through the looking glass**

what a good idea it would be to place on this carpet something that would move about and be dark enough to set off these gleaming tints."[1] Des Esseintes thereupon bought a giant tortoise, laid it down on the carpet and immersed himself in viewing. "… the nigger-brown [sic] tint and the raw Sienna hue of the shell, dimmed the sheen of the carpet instead of bringing out its colours; the predominating gleams of silver had now lost nearly all their sparkle and matched the cold tones of scrapped zinc along the edges of this hard, lusterless carapace. … he came to the conclusion that his original idea of using a dark object moving to and fro to stir up the fires within the woolen pile was mistaken. The fact of the matter was that the carpet was still too bright, too garish, too new looking; its colours had not been sufficiently toned down and subdued. The thing was to … deaden these colours, to dim them by the contrast of a brilliant object that would kill everything around it, drowning the gleams of silver in a golden radiance. … Des Esseintes accordingly decided to have his tortoise's buckler glazed with gold.

• Back from the workshop where the gilder had given it board and lodging, the reptile blazed as brightly as any sun, throwing out its rays over the carpet, whose tints turned pale and weak."[2] But it would not be complete "until it had been encrusted with precious stones."[3] "He finally decided on a series of stones with contrasting colours – the mahogany-red hyacinth of Compostella followed by the sea-green aquamarine, the vinegar-pink balas ruby by the pale slate-coloured Sudermania ruby. Their feeble luster would be sufficient to set off the dark shell but not enough to detract from the bunch of jeweled flowers which they were to frame in a slender garland of subdued brilliance."[4] In the end the tortoise dies under the strain of its adornment.

• The title Karin Kneffel gave to the exhibition refers to another literary work, which is also placed in the second half of the 19th century: Lewis Carroll's book "Through the Looking Glass," the second part of "Alice in Wonderland," penned in 1872. In it, an upside-down world is created, serving as a mirror of one's own reality. In the world that lies "through the glass" the order of time and space is turned on its head: "Now, *here*, you see, it takes all the running *you* can do, to keep in the same place. If you want to get somewhere else, you must run at least twice as fast as that!"[5] says the queen to Alice. The objects come to life in that other world and display their perfidies; the landscape has transformed into a monstrosity.

• The lesson of "Through the Looking Glass" had the lasting effect of a distant memory from childhood when Karin Kneffel dealt with the subject of mirroring in her new works. She did not take up the book again until the series was finished. In one painting (Ill. p. 77), the picture plane is subdivided into fields, which have been broken up in manifold ways. The depicted objects gradually emerge: two ostensibly oriental rugs, a green pillow and a lamp, a bed with a bedspread as well as a little brown stand on which a small television sits showing the image of a man shooting; the glossy floor appears to be smooth as glass. Since the individual elements are mimetically so precisely depicted, the act of viewing involuntarily initiates a process of ordering. The viewer attempts to fit the objects into a logical, familiar system. Over a long period of time the viewer remains a prisoner of the image because resolution is never completely successful, it remains an uncertainty. This is how Karin Kneffel exaggerated the effects of mirroring, depicted them with excess, and it comes to slight distortions. Slight doubts creep in, whether it is perhaps a water surface, thus a flooded living room – like in a video by the artist Susanne Kutter, which has the intrusion of unexplained violence in the security of middle-class living as its subject. Kneffel's images often appear at least partly as though covered with a white veil or the materiality of separating glass walls is missing there where one would presume them to be.

• In a passage that introduces the subject of the mirror, Alice describes her vision, which becomes reality during the stream of her description: "'…all my ideas about Looking-glass house. First, there's the room you can see through the glass – that's just the same as our drawing-room, only the things go the other way. … How nice it would be if we could only get through into the Looking-glass house! … Let's pretend the glass has got soft like gauze, so that we can get through. Why, it's turning into a sort of mist now, I declare! It'll be easy enough to get through— ' … And certainly the glass was beginning to melt away, just like a bright silvery mist."[6]

• In the most recent interiors she has produced, Karin Kneffel addressed the border between interior and exterior space. This itself is not displayed in a painterly fashion, but covered up: with reflections indicating a windowpane; with differences in size demarcating spatial levels or with the curtain motif – something of great importance to this artist. Both the transition from artificial to natural or from the canny to the uncanny takes place at that threshold. Yet nothing concerning these images can be clearly defined. Again, numerous discrepancies can be found: The curtain's plicature and the reflections are depicted incorrectly and the lighting is not consistent. Kneffel exhausts all possibilities for the depiction of artificial and natural light, whereas, for instance, twilight and wan neon light in the "light coloration" of Kneffel's palette lie very close to each other. The painter transcribes her subject into every last detail. While the natural birch leaves shine in an unnatural manner, the leaves on the houseplant in the interior have their counterpart in the ornaments covering the lampshade and possess an off color tone, which is nevertheless reminiscent of the color of the object. (Ill. p. 87)

• Kneffel's painting technique moves between the poles of materialization and dematerialization. On the quadruple grounded canvas, which she stretches herself, she applies up to four layers of paint with the finest brush. Like veils, each covers the entire surface. Should the artist change something in one spot, it has consequences for the entire organization of the image; the area is then completely coated again with another filmy layer.

• The extremely electrified atmosphere in Karin Kneffel's images is striking. In the latest works she has produced, it has been escalated through the drama of their lighting, how they steer the gaze from light-protected space into the darkness of night as well as, finally, the dissolution of the categories of time and space. By way of exception, human beings are recognizable in one of the images (Ill. pp. 84, 85), yet only dimly in the dark since the effect of (the viewer) being blinded by the light of the lamp in the foreground is ingeniously simulated through painting. It is a portrayal of the artist's husband and son in a private allusion.

• After studying literature and philosophy, the artist committed herself to the praxis and purposefully picked Gerhard Richter as her instructor, in whose master class she would later graduate. Their striking commonality is a strategy of the systematic acquisition of the most different areas of painting. Karin Kneffel dares to rise to very elementary challenges of painting that have been current since antiquity, not the least of which include draperies, carpets, animal heads or the depiction of fire. On one hand, the artist is concerned with painting as pure painting and reflects a certain sobriety in her approach: The image is an image and first of all nothing more than a surface. On the other, it is about painting in the service of creating illusions and also about their destruction. Karin Kneffel is motivated by the desire to paint, by the joy, in the very original sense, of creating something with artistic means. It is not previously present as concept or calculation. She instead first collects experiences during the process of painting. Some time ago she turned to the subject of portraying human beings, she says. She formulates it as laconically as if she did not feel the burden of history. And how does she tackle this new subject? She paints human beings from Rubens, Michelangelo and Tiepolo, not in the sense of a pedantic copy, but as a form of free appropriation (she pulls down the ceiling fresco from the Würzburger Residenz without further ado and makes it a mural) – as an image in an image. In the middle of it she puts human beings from our time, viewers of art with their specific poses, her own students in casual clothes. Thus it comes to an interaction between image and the viewer in the image, which she visualizes before our eyes with a hint of irony.

1 Joris-Karl Huysmans, *Against Nature*, translated by Robert Baldick (Baltimore: Penguin Books: 1959), 53–54. **2** Ibid., 54. **3** Ibid. **4** Ibid., 56–57. **5** Lewis Carroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland and Through the Looking Glass* (ed. London: J.M. Dent & Sons Ltd: 1957), 140. **6** Ibid., 122.