• Most of them look up with their heads back in their necks, the chin raised or at least the gaze. They do not notice they are being watched, that the detail view of the image has advanced right up onto the body. In a perspective from below, from the back, at breast height, one can see the whites of their eyes, shoulders pulled in, one has his mouth open. Yes, this is how they look: human beings in museums. They wear wrinkled jeans and casual jackets, crocheted scarves and wool caps, have their glasses on and every strand of hair swept away from the forehead. Karin Kneffel painted their portraits, alone and in small groups.

• It has become many images, watercolors, none larger than a sheet of writing paper. And so the crowd of museum visitors stands in a row on the wall of the exhibition like a series of snapshots, as if the painter was on a field trip, as if she were observing a different species. This one is looking away; concentrating on a point outside of the picture plane. Yet what they see is only half of a secret: Behind their silhouettes there is enough space for ceiling paintings, wall frescos, friezes – everything in large format. Most show bodies that fit into the category of the angel or allegory; noble, idealized figures, and with a little more knowledge one might be able to identify them. Yet there is seldom a profile or characteristic head – most of it is drapery, muscle flexing and dramatic pose.

• These ambiguous, interwoven scenes are the artist's first attempts at inviting human beings into her paintings as recognizable, clearly drawn persons. Until now, if they emerged at all, they were always somehow placeholders in landscapes animated by trees and plants, and interiors where lonely furniture lived. They were figures, which mirrored themselves in the floor when the painting demanded it, as if Karin Kneffel were setting up figures for miniature models. The copy, the portrait never interested her, she says. It is always a question of painting, of relationships and relations; not of metaphors, stories, motifs or even a copy of heavily populated reality.

catrin lorch **interwoven relationships**

• There is an earlier black-and-white Woody Allen film in which he tells how he likes to go to the Museum of Modern Art in New York because that is where all of the beautiful women are. Perhaps it is also because they can be stared at more easily. In front of Karin Kneffel's watercolor studies is where one first notices that when captured in the act of looking, one's own appearance is obviously forgotten. Rapt in reading, intensely listening to music or locked into an image, we drift away from our own position in the world. Days of reading are the happiest hours books can give us because they completely envelop us in a moment that would have been lost had we lived through it with more attention. Karin Kneffel shows ideal viewers because they are empty, receptive, have abandoned themselves to that moment. There are no more attitudes or poses because the entire body is standing there as if it were hung up on the gaze.

• In this moment, the image and the viewer do not meet in opposition. It seems as though Karin Kneffel were pushing two zones into each other: the paintings she quotes and the portraits she creates with the brush herself. Of course the people here could also originate from photographs – or from other images. But one believes these faces of her, the clothing and, above all, the countenance of being caught up in something outside oneself. Thus a choreography emerges between the constellation of figures on the paintings and frescos and the bodies Karin Kneffel draws – two rows of dancers compete against each other. The old masters cross with contemporary painting – and the correlation between the contemporary's self-confident appearance, which is allowed to overlap and superimpose its histories, and the structuring, challenging presence of history is finely balanced.

• These are complicatedly interwoven relationships that quickly reveal themselves. And it is surely no accident that Karin Kneffel is now creating entire scenes on paper, which could fully count as paintings, for the first time. Until now, she only watercolored in the details, almost optional motifs, which seemed like areas from her large compositions for canvas. At first glance one will not be able to tell the oil paintings from the watercolors in the catalogue. In the exhibition, the small format asks the viewer to please take a step closer. It wants to be seen up close and one leans toward it like over a letter or a photograph – there is little room for distance.

• Thus one is at the mercy of these uncanny perspectives. Uncanny because although they are hardly spectacular, they seem familiar: As *flaneur* one meets passers-by at exactly this distance; sitting in the subway one's gaze is pressured downward by the other passengers. A fall down the stairs looks like the accordion pleats in the runner's floral pattern, frontal, a little bit off balance, if the surroundings were missing it would be a long fall. One's sense of orientation reaches for the handrail, the gaze does not slip because the stairs' treads are so well fit. Each borders a shadow gap and the imagination can use this to hold itself steady.

• This special perspective is what all of Karin Kneffel's images have in common. The construction of pictorial space, which characterize and distinguish her painting, is stronger than the palette or the brushstroke. This could be because the Karin Kneffel whose painting style one can thoroughly describe as realistic never uses photographic resources – unlike most of her colleagues who work with photographs projected onto the canvas. If she does work from photos, the motifs are translated "freehand" into the painting. This is how, with realism, she avoids implanting the laws of the camera lens into her painting. The optics of photographers and filmmakers has its own rules. Even if we as media users have been so conditioned to the photographic or filmic image that we hardly notice the difference at first, the body feels it is dealing with a reality that has been automatically copied by glass eyes or light sensitive surfaces.

• Karin Kneffel's painting stands in contrast to this through an accomplishment of translation that is to the derivatives of photography what the protocol is to the poem. Thus it is no amazement that the almost floating frontal perspective over landings, between table legs or from the height of a chair is always balanced out with the positions and bearing of the body. One quickly adjusts to the illusions on the canvas. It is more the feeling of being Kafka's bucket rider flying freely through the world than being in a gentle, film camera crane flight or dolly ride. This effectively distances her last series' conceptual handling of motifs in what really are thoroughly related points of departure from Karin Kneffel's peers in photography out of the Becher school: Gursky, Struth or Höfer – all of them have searched for similar locations and set them in the image. But the viewers can not physically enter into these situations; they remain flat.

• The accessories, the persons in the images, absorb the paintings with their gazes. This stretches across their faces like a protective sail, rolls out as a banner of their attention. The painted space – whether church, castle hall, or museum – then opens up like a precious box, a shrine, painted with heavenly furies, cloud mountains, angel plumage – it opens up like Ali Baba's cave.

• No, it is not as though she were cutting away our eyelids. That is not even in question. Our eyes were dilated long ago by all of the lenses, the glass optics of photography, the flattening and dressing of the electronic production of images, the artificial effects of digital parallel worlds. Standing in front of Karin Kneffel's images we feel that every gaze is rooted in a body.