

PRESS RELEASE

THE 80s. FIGURATIVE PAINTING IN WEST GERMANY

22 JULY TO 18 OCTOBER 2015

Städel Museum, Exhibition Annex

Frankfurt am Main, 21 July 2015. From 22 July to 18 October 2015, the Städel Museum will be presenting “The 80s. Figurative Painting in West Germany” in a major special exhibition. With ninety works by altogether twenty-seven artists, the show will illuminate the novel, disconcerting and enormously dynamic approach to figurative painting that developed in the 1980s almost simultaneously in Berlin, Hamburg and the Rhineland. Works by Ina Barfuss, Werner Büttner, Walter Dahn, Jiří Georg Dokoupil, Rainer Fetting, Georg Herold, Martin Kippenberger, Helmut Middendorf, Christa Näher, Albert Oehlen, Salomé, Andreas Schulze and many others will be on view. The exhibition will shed light on the West German art centres – for example Moritzplatz in Berlin or Mülheimer Freiheit in Cologne – while at the same time providing insights into the figurative painting of those years in all its complexity and diversity. The artists who turned the art world topsy-turvy with unbridled intensity and a fast painterly tempo in the years around 1980 produced figurative paintings that ventured a critical examination of the tradition of painting, the post-war avant-gardes and their own immediate present. They drew their themes primarily from their surroundings. As a result, the established art scene became as much a subject of their works as homosexual emancipation and the intoxicating pace of the international club and music world conveyed by New Wave and Punk from the mid seventies onward. The protagonists of the time were nevertheless anything but a homogeneous painterly movement. On the contrary, the painting of a decade demarcated by student revolts on one end and a reunified Germany on the other is distinguished by a multi-faceted and often contradictory coexistence of various currents, influences and sensitivities. With its specific focus on post-1945 painting, the Städel Museum’s collection of contemporary art offers an ideal framework for the presentation of this eventful decade.

The exhibition is being sponsored by the Deutsche Bank AG.

“With this exhibition, the Städel is unearthing a vast treasure chest of paintings that have been viewed through the spectacles of traditional clichés for too long – works that belong to our collective pictorial memory on the one hand, but can well stand to be reassessed and perceived anew in their painterly potency and conceptual complexity on the other”, observes Städel Museum director Max Hollein.

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The contemporary, historicizing perspective on this indisputably complex aesthetic phenomenon offers a means of discerning structural similarities and testing new art-historical approaches and inquiries without overlooking the diversity of the art it produced. Without negating the originality and diversity of these paintings, the show will pose the question as to where this painting came from, what stance it takes on its own tradition in the so-called post-modern environment, and what role it might play for the present through a new or more discerning localization in its own time: "What we are dealing with here is a generation of artists who, in a clearly defined period, triggered a tremendously controversial response with the sheer vehemence of their presence and the novelty of their painting. At the same time, to this day there is no coherent narrative that meaningfully links these paintings with what came before and what came after. This complex set of circumstances makes it necessary to characterize – from the art-historical and museological points of view – the significance of these paintings for the subsequent generation of artists as well as their relationship to their own tradition", comments Dr Martin Engler, head of the Städel's collection of contemporary art and curator of the exhibition.

The show "The 80s. Figurative Painting in West Germany" aims to pave new, unobstructed access to an era in the history of painting that has all too often fallen through the cracks of discourse, and whose special qualities have been overshadowed by their pop-cultural context – however important and formative the latter may have been. Without wanting to disregard this specific context, the show will endeavour an art-historical perspective that also takes the connection to post-war painting into account. The West German and West Berlin painting of the 1980s is by no means to be regarded as isolated from artistic forerunners such as Georg Baselitz, Gerhard Richter and Sigmar Polke; at the same time, it clearly dissociated itself from those influences. The generation that emerged around 1980 in Germany's art centres – Berlin, Hamburg and the Rhineland – produced paintings whose energy, intensity and directness distinguishes their art from everything that had preceded it. Owing to the unusual expressive force characterizing the artists of the eighties, contemporary art criticism associated them with German Expressionism and the French Fauves. They were given numerous labels such as the "Junge Wilde" ("Wild Youth") or "Neo-Expressionists", and they themselves exhibited their works under the heading "Heftige Malerei" ("Fierce Painting"). None of these designations ever really took hold, however, not least of all because of the fact that the movement was unquestionably heterogeneous in nature. Despite the critics' scepticism, the artists soon made it big on the art market, even if that success ebbed after a few years with the perspective of time. In view of the fast pace of that eventful decade, little time remained for art history. The large-scale survey "The 80s. Figurative Painting in West Germany" will bring home to its visitors that – even today, thirty years later –, however familiar we are with it, the representational painting of that era still has a disconcertingly alien quality.

The exhibition will present superb loans, among them works from museum collections such as the Hessisches Landesmuseum Darmstadt, the Klassik Stiftung Weimar, Neues Museum Weimar or the Berlinische Galerie – Landesmuseum für Moderne Kunst, numerous private loans, works from the Deutsche Bank collection, and nine

examples from the Städel's own holdings, including three paintings that made their way into the museum in 2008 as part of a group of altogether six hundred works from the Deutsche Bank collection.

A tour of the exhibition

Arranged both geographically and thematically, the presentation will spread out over both floors of the Städel's exhibition annex. The respective West German art centres will thus on the one hand be mirrored along with their distinguishing and contradictory affinities and diversities; on the other hand, their shared thematic or motivic interests will be featured as a way of shedding light on the connections between them. The show will get underway with the classical genre of portrait painting. Particularly the self-portraits, for example Albert Oehlen's *Self-Portrait with Palette* (1984); Werner Büttner's *Self-Portrait Masturbating at the Cinema* (1980), Luciano Castelli's *Berlin Nite* (1979) or Walter Dahn's *Self Double* (1982), mirror the artists' intense investigation of the painting medium. Still frequently drawing on traditional painterly themes, the "Neue Welle" ("New Wave") of painting in the eighties was characterized above all by its experimental and dynamic stylistic pluralism. Even if, with his self-portrait, Albert Oehlen subscribed to an astonishingly traditional variation on this pictorial subject, it remains unclear whether he was affirming, reviewing, caricaturing or meaninglessly repeating it, or all of the above.

The confrontation with the artist ego in the first room is followed by a geographically defined group in the second. The painters associated with the Galerie am Moritzplatz, which was founded in the West Berlin district of Kreuzberg in 1977 by Rainer Fetting, Helmut Middendorf, and Salomé and Bernd Zimmer, formed the core. G. L. Gabriel became a member in 1979, and exhibited in group and solo shows at Moritzplatz until the gallery's dissolution in 1981. The Berlin of that period – a liberal, chaotic city beyond the reaches of the Bundeswehr (Federal German armed forces) and the conservative West German province – was the principle motif for these painters, who had come to the metropolis from the West German states. Rainer Fetting painted the Berlin Wall in a wide range of variations. For him, however, the Wall was initially just a part of everyday life and the view from his studio window, and not the political statement it is perceived as from the perspective of viewers some three decades later. Whereas artists such as Fetting, Gabriel or Middendorf addressed themselves to the urban architecture, Bernd Zimmer executed landscape paintings in which he examined the boundary between figure and abstraction. The juxtaposition of Zimmer's *Field, Rape* (1979) and Fetting's *Van Gogh and Wall Sun* (1979) demonstrates the diversity of the painterly approaches – from colour-field to an almost purely gestural, disintegrative style. A fundamental element in the work of the Berlin artists was the Punk and sub-culture scene forming in those years, whose dynamic and rawness they adopted in their work. This is especially vivid, for example, in *Electric Night* (1979) by Helmut Middendorf. Not just the schematically depicted figures in the colourful jungle of the night are "electrified" here, but to the same degree the painting itself, already in the colour combination alone: intensely vibrant ultramarine and gaudily bright red.

The "electrified big-city natives" reappear in *Big Shower* (1981) by Rainer Fetting, in a certain sense as classical nude models in various poses. The body discourse thus

introduced was carried forward in Salomé's paintings. His works confront the viewer with homo-erotic nude depictions that were drastic, as political as they were radical, and above all explicit, and clearly transcended the social norms of the period in question. They will be joined by such works as *Golden Man Beating Slut* (1980) by Albert Oehlen or Christa Näher's mystical-looking works visualizing encounters of hermaphroditic creatures, half-human and half-animal. One theme here is the role played by the sexes in the partner relationship, another the permissive depiction of erotic fantasies far removed from middle-class morals. Middendorf, for example, translated the intensity and crudeness of the subculture into his series *Big-City Natives* with a fierce brushstroke, thus introducing his surroundings into his works in a wholly different manner.

While on the ground floor the body discourse will already allude indirectly to political aspects, the second part of the presentation on the first floor will begin with a number of works of clearly political motivation. In addition to icons such as Albert Oehlen's *Fuehrer's Headquarters* (1982), the room will also feature Fetting's *First Painting of the Wall* (1977), Salomé's *Haemorrhoea* (1979) or Hans Peter Adamski's *MAO* portrait (1983). Also on view will be paintings like Dokoupil's *Star in Distress*, (1982), which no sooner make use of political symbols than they dissolve the accompanying contexts of meaning. This description also applies to Kippenberger's key work *With the Best Will in the World, I Can't See a Swastika* (1984). The swastika, both visible and invisible, undermines, questions and ironizes the political symbol to equal degrees. The title gives the viewer of the work a reference to its subject but never really comes through on the visual level. Kippenberger arranged abstract geometric forms in such a way that they seem on the verge of forming ideologically charged symbols, but never actually do. The works presented in this section of the show will demonstrate that the political aspects of the paintings are just one meta level, one of many constantly oscillating thematic set-pieces producing ever new contexts of meaning.

The paintings of the Hamburg scene around Werner Büttner, Georg Herold, Martin Kippenberger, and Albert and Markus Oehlen will pick up the thread of the political discourse in the following room. The group is not as clearly definable in geographical terms; what they shared, rather, was their association with Sigmar Polke's academy class in Hamburg and Max Hetzler's gallery. Unlike the "Moritz boys" in Berlin, the Hamburg group did not form primarily as an exhibition collective, but rather as an alliance of friends. Kippenberger, Albert Oehlen and Büttner first met in Hamburg in 1977; Georg Herold came to Hamburg from Munich the same year. Ina Barfuss and Thomas Wachweger, who had already been friends of Martin Kippenberger's since the early 1970s, left the Hansa city in 1978 with Kippenberger to go to Berlin. Whereas the Berliners around Fetting and Middendorf cultivated a direct, unequivocal approach to painting, that of the artists around Oehlen and Kippenberger was less straightforward, devoted, as it was, to questioning the image, subject and contents of painting again and again. Their works are in a category somewhere between painting and text, between pathos, cliché and banality, and consistently treat social and political themes with an ironic/sarcastic undertone. The artists showed their paintings in Berlin as early as 1979 in the exhibition "Elend" ("Misery") organized by Kippenberger and taking place in "Kippenbergers Büro". As the artist stressed, the chief concern was "to do something

together” and not to work isolated from one another. Kippenberger pursued this idea of community not only in organized group shows but also in other actions in his “office” or at the Club SO36 he ran from 1978 onward; it culminated in 1981 in the major group exhibition “Rundschau Deutschland I” (“Germany Review I”) in Munich. In the Städel exhibition, it will be reflected in the third room on the first floor in the works of the so-called satellites or mavericks. Examples by Ina Barfuss and Thomas Wachweger, by Bettina Semmer, Volker Tannert, Andreas Schulze and the group “Normal”, consisting of Peter Angermann, Jan Knap and Milan Kunc, will be on display here.

The third geographically oriented room will follow, featuring the “Mülheimer Freiheit”. From 1980 onward, Hans Peter Adamski, Peter Bömmels, Walter Dahn, Jiří Georg Dokoupil, Gerard Kever and Gerhard Naschberger worked in a joint studio in the street by that name in the Deutz district of Cologne. Dahn recorded the group’s founding on canvas in his work *The Birth of the Mülheimer Freiheit* (1981). Though academically trained, none of the six artists had undergone classical training as a painter. Their subjects were the art scene itself, as well as the banalities of everyday life, which they discussed and ‘processed’ artistically. The “Mülheimer Freiheit” cultivated a deliberately aestheticized dilettantism that manifested itself in clichéd, kitschy and banal – but from the painterly point of view always fascinating – works. This directness and lack of scruple also found expression in joint works by Dahn and Dokoupil such as *Untitled (Vomiter II)* (1980). The works produced by the “Mülheimer Freiheit” are particularly vivid illustrations of the stylistic pluralism that distinguished new art around 1980 in general.

This fascinating multifariousness is evident not only in the comparison between the various groups and artists, but even within the œuvres of the individual artists. Their works are characterized by the same openness, the same heterogeneity, with regard to form and content alike. What links these artists above and beyond their diversity, however, is their capacity to bring even the greatest aesthetic as well as thematic contrasts together to create entirely cohesive compositions. Their paintings can be read as poetic pictorial metaphors whose meaning changes with every reading.

The exhibition will be accompanied by a catalogue edited by Martin Engler and published by Hatje Cantz Verlag, with a foreword by Max Hollein, texts by Zdenek Felix, Walter Grasskamp, Martin Engler and Franziska Leuthäusser, and a panel discussion with Walter Grasskamp, Max Hetzler and Ingrid Raab.

List of artists: Hans Peter Adamski, Peter Angermann, Elvira Bach, Ina Barfuss, Peter Bömmels, Werner Büttner, Luciano Castelli, Walter Dahn, Jiří Georg Dokoupil, Rainer Fetting, G. L. Gabriel, Georg Herold, Gerard Kever, Jan Knap, Milan Kunc, Martin Kippenberger, Helmut Middendorf, Christa Näher, Gerhard Naschberger, Albert Oehlen, Markus Oehlen, Salomé, Andreas Schulze, Bettina Semmer, Volker Tannert, Thomas Wachweger and Bernd Zimmer.

The exhibition digital

With the digital developed especially for the show, the Städel is offering an additional digital mediation format. The responsive website conveys background information, art and cultural-historical contexts, and themes of fundamental relevance for the exhibition.



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Sponsored by the Aventis Foundation and available in German and English, this digital offer is free of charge and provides the public with a means of tuning in to the exhibition before coming to the museum. With image, sound, film and text, the multimedia application combines the contents in a multifaceted presentation and opens up entirely new paths in the depiction, narration and mediation of art. The digital is available on 80er.staedelmuseum.de.

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Curators: Dr Martin Engler, head of the collection of contemporary art; Franziska Leuthäuser, assistant curator of contemporary art

Exhibition dates: 22 July to 18 October 2015

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Opening hours: Tue, Wed, Sat, Sun and holidays 10 am – 6 pm, Thu + Fri 10 am – 9 pm

Special opening hours: Sat, 3 Oct. 2015: 10 am – 6 pm

Admission: 14 EUR, reduced 12 EUR, family ticket 24 EUR; admission free for children to the age of 12; groups (minimum 10 persons): reduced admission fee per person. Groups are required to book in advance by contacting us at +49(0)69-605098-200 or info@staedelmuseum.de.

Advance ticket sales online at: tickets.staedelmuseum.de

Catalogue: The exhibition will be accompanied by a comprehensive catalogue published by Hatje Cantz Verlag and edited by Martin Engler. With a foreword by Max Hollein and texts by Martin Engler, Zdenek Felix, Walter Grasskamp, Franziska Leuthäuser and others, and a panel discussion with Walter Grasskamp, Max Hetzler and Ingrid Raab. In German, 264 pages, 276 illustrations, 34.90 EUR (museum edition)

Digital: The digital is being made possible by the Aventis Foundation. Design and programming: Scholz & Volkmer. Available on: 80er.staedelmuseum.de

Social Media: The Städel Museum is communicating the exhibition on the social media with the hashtags #80er and #staedel.

General guided tours of the exhibition: Tue 5 pm, Sun 11 am. Tickets: 4 EUR in addition to the admission fee, available starting two hours before the tour begins (Sundays from 10 am) at the Städel cashier's desk

Afternoon special: Admission + guided tour of the special exhibition (offer available online only), Saturdays at 3 pm, 16 EUR, tickets.staedelmuseum.de.

Evening special: Admission + guided tour of the special exhibition (offer available online only), Thursdays at 7 pm, 16 EUR, tickets.staedelmuseum.de.

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