

PRESS INFORMATION

ANDREAS MÜHE: STORIES OF CONFLICT

EXTENDED TO 11 SEPTEMBER 2022

Collection of Contemporary Art

Frankfurt am Main, 24 January 2022. Andreas Mühe is one of Germany's best-known artists. His photos revolve around sociological, historical, and political themes, which he stages in elaborately constructed, dramatically lit settings. From 16 February to 11 September 2022, the Städel Museum is presenting a solo exhibition of some 45 works by Mühe, among them better and lesser-known series from his oeuvre to date as well as the cycle *Biorobots II* (2021), here on view for the first time. In his works, he concerns himself with attribution to collective categories such as family, nationality, politics, and culture as constructs of a social order. His portraits of Angela Merkel are iconic: he accompanied the former federal chancellor on many of her travels and undertook an in-depth analysis of her poses. The degree to which these shots are characterized by a political pictorial language is evident in other photographs of Merkel featuring the artist's mother as a double. The line between real and staged becomes blurred—in the official and the simulated photos alike. In the town of Wandlitz, Mühe also photographed the houses of the one-time leaders of East Germany's Socialist Unity Party (SED). Surrounded by darkness, they look like mock-ups and belie their historical role. Mühe uses a large-format camera that, on account of its difficult handling, presupposes complex compositions. With a sharply pointed aesthetic, he depicts historical occurrences or their venues in timeless environments. His aim is not to illustrate but to reinterpret the given contents – whether human beings, architecture, or landscape – by pictorial means. Mühe's photos play with the viewers' visual habits, an approach also encountered in works in the Städel collection by photographer colleagues of his such as Rodney Graham and Thomas Demand.

“His work is distinguished by his examinations of rifts in society, of violence, of the German-German identity, as well as his interrogations of himself and his own complicated family history. The Städel Museum is devoting its first exhibition of the year 2022 to photographs by Andreas Mühe. We only recently succeeded in acquiring his artwork *Under the Tree* of 2008 for the collection. Few photographers of

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the present burrow as painstakingly in German history and our remembrance culture as Andreas Mühe”, comments Städel Museum director Philipp Demandt.

Curator Kristina Lemke, who heads the Städel’s photography collection, adds: “As in a game of deception, Andreas Mühe’s photos always demand a second look. At first sight his works look familiar, but he breaks with expectations and shows how illusory aestheticized pictorial worlds can be.”

Andreas Mühe (b. in Karl-Marx-Stadt, present-day Chemnitz, in 1979) lives and works in Berlin. Following classical training as a photo lab technician, he went into business for himself as a freelance photographer. He specialized in portrait and magazine photography and spent the first ten years of his career carrying out commissions for *Süddeutsche Magazin*, *Die Zeit*, *Monopol*, *Vanity Fair*, and other publications. His works have been presented nationally and internationally. Major solo exhibitions have taken place at the Deichtorhallen Hamburg (2017) and the Berlin Nationalgalerie Hamburger Bahnhof – Museum für Gegenwartskunst in Berlin (2019) and caused a sensation. The artist has received numerous photography awards.

Series on exhibit

Angela Merkel, 2008

Andreas Mühe portrayed Angela Merkel several times and accompanied her on trips to India, New York, Washington, and elsewhere. His hitherto most well-known work on the former chancellor dates from 2008. *Under the Tree* is its simple title. In it, he stages Merkel in an extremely unusual setting in Berlin’s botanical garden. Deep in thought and turned away from the viewer, she gazes at a pond. Mühe plays with the viewer’s visual memory. For only at second glance do the typical features of Angela Merkel’s trouser suit and hairstyle reveal her identity. Yet the impression of witnessing a moment of privacy is deceptive. The stringently calculated composition tells a different story: the direct lighting and strong contrasts lend the scenery the look of a stage set. Nature and the human being, privacy and staging form mutually dependent contrasts.

A.M. – A Tour of Germany, 2013

She represented Germany on the national and international stage. But as federal chancellor, Angela Merkel usually saw the country only from inside the car that took her on her many trips. That is the idea Mühe plays with in his work cycle *A.M. – A Tour of Germany*. From the Zugspitze to the industrialist Krupp family’s Villa Hügel,

the politician gazes at places of historical significance that, framed by the small window, look like postcard motifs. In reality, the woman in the pictures is not Merkel at all: Mühe staged his own mother, wearing a wig and tailormade suit jackets, as a double. “The viewer is responsible for what happens in their head, not the photographer”, says the artist about the work. The representation and perception of historically prominent persons and places ultimately result from personal memories shaped by media images – with all their vagueness and manipulations.

Obersalzberg, 2011/ 2012

In his photo series *Obersalzberg*, Mühe explores propaganda imagery of the Nazi period. Adolf Hitler and other politicians availed themselves of photography to increase their own renown and manipulate the masses politically. With support from the state, Leni Riefenstahl advanced to become the world’s most well-known film director and Nazi propagandist. She and her cameraman Walther Frenz contributed decisively to the establishment of the Führer cult – the staging of Hitler for propagandistic purposes – and its dissemination by way of the media. Mühe uses extras in uniform and well-known props to reconstruct the traditional visual formulae before the mighty mountain backdrop of the Obersalzberg, Hitler’s holiday home, which was converted to serve as a second government headquarters. By showing the protagonists in cramped positions or in the act of urinating, he reveals the emptiness of the poses and the melodramatically charged character of the surroundings.

Mühe Head, 2018

The self-portrait series is part of the work cycle *Mishpocha*, in which Mühe investigated his own family history and the concept of ‘identity’. He had silicon figures of closely related members of his family as well as himself elaborately made by hand and then arranged them photographically. The head studies – also part of the workgroup – are to be understood as preliminary stages, but also function as individual works in their own right. In 24 shots, Mühe documented the decomposition of his bust, which he accelerated by exposing it manually to extreme cold and heat. The various stages stand for the facets of the self between self-perception and perception through the eyes of others, as well as of the problematic nature of addressing this theme.

New Romanticism, 2015

A view past a rocky ridge and a wooded landscape to the sea. In its compositional handling of surface and space and its artificial lighting, the scene appears as if in a painting by Caspar David Friedrich. In the magnificent natural landscape, the inconspicuous figure of a man looks almost lost. His nakedness and the position of

his left hand are disconcerting. With this detail, Mühe takes the pathos formulae coined by German art of past centuries – recurring gestures and facial expressions as vehicles of emotion – to the point of absurdity. In Romanticist imagery, the depiction of beautiful and imposing natural scenery serves as a reminder of humankind’s earthly mortality. In the *New Romanticism* work series, Mühe avails himself of the same aesthetic construct to break with German cultural identity.

Wandlitz, 2011

During the era of the German Democratic Republic, high-ranking functionaries of the socialist state lived in the simple houses of the Wandlitz residential area. The unassuming architecture contrasts starkly with the political importance of its onetime inhabitants. When they lived here, the closely guarded district was inaccessible to outsiders. In his photos, Mühe strips the buildings of their inconspicuousness and creates an atmosphere of unease. The closed curtains mark a distance to the outside world. The backgrounds remain in the dark, lending the house façades the quality of lifeless props in stage-like foregrounds.

Chernobyl, 2020

The so-called “liquidators” were the first workers called in to help control the contamination following the reactor accident in Chernobyl in 1986. In the international press they came to be known by the English term “biorobots”. Some 600,000 helpers from all over the Soviet Union were enlisted by government decree. Before even leaving the site, or shortly thereafter, many of them died of health complications caused by the strong radiation. The victims totalled more than half a million. Mühe devoted a series to these meanwhile forgotten people. Lighting them directly from above or one side, he depicted the figures in a seemingly empty space before a dark background as on a stage. The backdrop looks far too clean and sterile in view of the real historical disaster. The costumes have been meticulously replicated, but the faces remain hidden behind thick gas masks. Are there real human beings inside the gear? Mühe’s effect aesthetics is always ambiguous: in their statuary poses and stiff attire, the Biorobots inspire both veneration and awe.

Biorobots II, 2021

When Mühe finished the *Chernobyl* series, his means of exhibiting it were limited by the corona pandemic. At the same time, the historical event – the nuclear reactor disaster of 1986 – took on new currency and inspired him to continue his work on the theme. In *Biorobots II*, he explored the idea of an apocalyptic world. Owing to their uniformity, the buildings look like barracks in a homogeneous, atmospherically cold environment where survival is possible only at the cost of severe physical limitation.

Dressed in full protective gear, the protagonists are characterized by a sense of helplessness further epitomized by their seemingly arbitrary occupations.

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Exhibition dates: 16 February to 19 June 2022 – extended until 11 September 2022

Curator: Dr. des. Kristina Lemke (Head of the Photography Collection, Städel Museum) in close cooperation with Andreas Mühe

Location: Städel Museum, Schaumainkai 63, 60596 Frankfurt am Main

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Opening hours: Tue, Wed, Fri, Sat, Sun + holidays 10.00 am–6.00 pm, Thu 10.00 am–9.00 pm

Special opening hours: For information on special opening hours, for example on Easter, see www.staedelmuseum.de

Admission to the special exhibition and the permanent exhibition: Tue–Fri 16 EUR, reduced 14 EUR; Sat, Sun + holidays 16 EUR, reduced 14 EUR; from 2 March to 19 June Tue–Fri 16 EUR, reduced 14 EUR; Sat, Sun + holidays 18 EUR, reduced 16 EUR; free admission for children under 12. Tickets can be booked online at shop.staedelmuseum.de/en.

Current COVID information for visiting the museum: A regularly updated overview of the official regulations for individual visitors and groups is available at www.staedelmuseum.de/en/covid-info and should be consulted immediately before visiting the museum.

Photography in the Collection of Contemporary Art: The Städel Museum has in its holdings more than 5,000 photographs dating from the medium's beginnings to the present. More contemporary photography awaits discovery in the permanent exhibition in the Garden Halls. The *CLOSE UP Photography & Painting* is a digital application that examines the relationship between the two ostensibly rival mediums. What role does photography play in art? What impact does it have on painting? The digital application also sheds light on historical contexts as well as lines of connection between art and society. All information on CLOSE UP at closeup.staedelmuseum.de/malereiundfotografie/en/

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