
Philipp von Rosen Galerie

Nic Hess

Ferdinand

Opening on April 1, 2022 from 4–10 pm (“Soft Opening”)

Exhibition from April 2 to Juni 4, 2022

The artist is present

In his work, Nic Hess interweaves motifs derived from the dismantling of materials of various origins into new pictorial units in a manner that is both precise in terms of craftsmanship and intellectually sharp-sensed. An elaborate process of disassembly releases (brand) symbols, logos and pictograms of a universal consumer culture, but also icons from politics and cultural history from their original contexts. Hess continuously draws from this comprehensive pool of images to generate new contexts of meaning and pointed pictorial statements, which sometimes extend object-like into three-dimensionality and relate directly to the immediate spatial conditions in clearly balanced installations.

In the entrance area, one already encounters Nic Hess’s undogmatic combinatorics, a refined combination of elements from contrary reference systems. In front of a wall covered with intricate curves made of tape stands a pedestal with a lying chicken hatching an egg. Against this background, which Hess compares to a shaggy “nest,” a baby alligator hatches instead of the expected chick. This obvious incongruity, reminiscent of the figure of a changeling, has an ominous, or at least unsettling, sense of an order out of joint: both as a laconic commentary on social issues of diversity, distinction, and discrimination, and as an allusion to current conflict situations in world politics, in which the boundaries between one's own and the other are drawn sharply and even by warlike means. The filigree form on the opposite wall was assembled by Hess from surgical instruments. On the one hand, they are disposable goods from China that are disposed of after a single use. On the other hand, Hess uses or recycles exactly the surgical utensils that the doctor used during an operation on himself and then gave to him. Arranged in a star shape, the different sizes and degrees of opening of the scissors result in a superordinate ornamental cross shape that emerges as a macabre self-portrait.

In the meticulous paper works of Nic Hess, the color fields of Richard Paul Lohse and the Twitter logo come together, the likeness of Berlusconi and a moon face illustration merge, the Pokémon drawing of his son continues in a strictly constructivist framework of lines by Piet Mondrian. Elsewhere, the playing field of *Men, Don't Get Angry* appears, multiplied and interlaced. The chair classics by Vitra are presented in a lush bouquet of flowers, from which a few wilted blossoms have already fallen.

For some years now, Hess has been making use of the rich library holdings of his late father, which contained a large number of illustrated books and catalogs, as well as posters from the fields of fine art, architecture and design. This led to an intensive study of Ferdinand Hodler. The exhibition title *Ferdinand* is also dedicated to him, which is both a tribute and a personal, confidential address. For Hess has come closer to his compatriot, has literally taken apart and systematically dissected the life and work of this most important Swiss painter of early modernism in numerous books. In the process, biographical aspects have also moved into the pictorial foreground. The collage *Ferdinand*, for example, is composed of fragments of Hodler’s paintings. In the center is a self-portrait of Hodler, dynamically cut out by Hess in order to take up the circular movement of the entire composition. Starting from the head portrait, a series of blue-violet mountain ranges fan out to the robe. The jagged silhouette of the mountain formations continues almost “naturally” in the

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prominent cheekbones and sunken features of Hodler's mistress, whom he portrayed on her deathbed. Hess softens her striking profile with a group of dolphins. It almost seems as if Hess is bringing about the resolution of the painful motif and thus emotional redemption with this almost decorative intervention.

Hess' reflective handling of pictorial material is reflected not only formally, but also in terms of content. Through extremely smooth transitions or seamless connections of contours and lines, he creates the impression of formal unity, which is able to disguise the extreme inconsistency and sometimes brutal contradictoriness of the motifs and subjects, and also levels out the predominance of certain, immediately recognizable images. In the rhythm between condensation and dissolution, the elegant, linear flow of his compositions carefully integrates all fragments and sets them in relation to each other in order to carry out new weightings. This also applies to the exhibition itself. In the basement, a line that in places strikes out in a heartbeat creates surprising connections between the heterogeneous elements of the installation.

In addition to the painstaking assembly of excerpts into a pictorially congruent context, Hess's work is determined by an in-depth study of the pictorial languages of the respective artists, whose reproductions he draws upon. Against the background of his appropriation of the characteristic stylistic features, he constructs the "Brooklyn Bridge" in the manner of Piet Mondrian from the structuring of the pictorial space by means of right-angled – here and there playfully bending – line structures and the color triad red-blue-yellow. Portraits by Hodler are repeatedly executed by Hess in the surrealist spirit of René Magritte. He compresses the striking Pop Art language of Roy Lichtenstein into a motif which, as a heraldic animal, is reminiscent of propagandistic formulas, but which appears to be a caricature of them due to the fragility of its components and the resulting awkwardness. Hess subtly superimposes the xenophobic depiction of a political poster, which is illustrated in the proverbial black sheep, with the image of a geisha, who stands out precisely because her skin – although artificially whitewashed – is particularly white. Hess impressively illustrates the proverbial black and white and the accompanying undifferentiated views and clichés, which prove to be constructed – and, as it were, fictitious – ideas and prejudices.

Hess takes a distinctly image- and information-critical stance in a work prominently displayed on the front wall of the gallery. Here, too, he exclusively uses excerpts from landscape paintings by Ferdinand Hodler, which he assigns to a yellow and a blue surface. Their composite form corresponds to the territorial outlines of Ukraine, which is outlined behind a stylized curtain of parallel black bars. Like a pre-screened media filter, it contributes to the possible falsification of the image. On both sides of the embattled country, father and son rebalance the balance of power in their constellation on a seesaw: Who is sitting on the long end of the stick?

For more information and pictures please contact the gallery.