

# Between dimensions

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THE DUCHESS

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LEAVE A COMMENT



*Ordnung (c) 2016 Ruprecht von Kaufmann (oil on linoleum on canvas) – Courtesy Galerie Crone*

Berlin painter Ruprecht von Kaufmann recently exhibited in several art fairs across the world, and our far-flung circle was able to simultaneously attend two: in Vienna, natürlich, and in Chicago. We have up till now only encountered von Kaufmann's eerie phantasmal universe in the flat pages of books and on flat laptop screens (which somehow manage to feel more flat than a book's page), staring tensely at his dot-eyed spectres, his tormented ghosts half appearing and half disappearing through the surface, writhing and struggling through mysteriously colourful and seemingly interminable mists. It was therefore a relief to come face-to-face for the first time. The paintings are big, audacious; their feverish presence is impressive on a grand scale, enclosing one—as they did at the [Galerie Crone](#) booth at the Vienna Contemporary—on three sides. At [Galerie Crone's](#) booth at the [Expo Chicago](#), despite the chaotic setting that threatened to drown them out, the main figures—a leaping horse and a ghostly couple—each remained bravely focused on their own personal battle to escape from the surface on which they were painted. For this is what quickens von Kaufmann's paintings with that desperate, pounding pulse: that his figures seem to struggle against some invisible prison.



*Kapriole (c) 2016 Ruprecht von Kaufmann (oil on linoleum) – Courtesy Galerie Crone*

What commands one's attention above all is von Kaufmann's drawing, and the calm assertion it seems to make: never be afraid to simply draw. For the drawing holds everything together, like a firm, strong thread. Sometimes the paint is so boldly understated, so lightly smeared, only hinting at the form with minimal tonal and

colour contrast, but the way it is drawn exudes unending confidence.

His drawing has swagger. It lilts across the picture with easy-going self-assurance. Von Kaufmann is noticeably comfortable in his figures, which distinguishes him from most contemporaries; they are drawn completely without strain. His figures are so lightly, breathily fixed to the surface. In person, one sees there is hardly anything there, and yet what is depicted is so substantial.



*(c) 2016 Ruprecht von Kaufmann (oil on linoleum) – Courtesy Galerie Crone*

The surfaces themselves are the other instantly striking thing about von Kaufmann's paintings, and something that makes seeing them in person a whole other experience. This in itself is a battlecry for painting: an assertion that painting is a thousands times more than the image, that it is no laborious photography substitute. Paintings hold their ground in our digital age, they can leave us breathless in their physicality when we expect only pixels, cropped and filtered, able to be slipped into our pockets. No, von Kaufmann's paintings do not respect digital borders, and they barely respect their substrates, with rebellious paint crawling over the edges, fused by time in their thick, viscous flow.

Von Kaufmann is near-abusive of the surface, pushed by his inquisitive, open-minded approach (and, one suspects, his sheer love of the tactility of his medium) to use tools of destruction against it. But every gouge in the surface is part of a larger vision that serves the image rather than destroys it. The large paintings in Vienna and Chicago are painted on linoleum (the small ones being in gouache). The lino itself becomes an intrinsic part of the picture. It buckles and bows—a three-dimensional quality not conveyed in digital reproductions—and seems to inflate figures intentionally under their deftly-painted folds of fabric. The synergy between image and surface betrays intention: von Kaufmann responds to the physical substrate, or plans its variegation; he is no careless adulterator of paintings.





The lino emerges in yet other ways, the more one attends to the paintings. In places, the paint simply gives way to the bare lino, its neutral colour and mid-tone in perfect sympathy with the mostly dampened, melancholy purples, greens and blues. It shows through energetic scumbles of rough, matte paint. And even more dramatically, von Kaufmann digs into the lino, carving out broad shapes in a necessarily stippled manner, or scribing frenzied lines that swarm in textured scribbles and transmute imperceptibly into painted lines. *Ordnung* works the interplay of surface and content in a remarkably sophisticated way. The 'figure'—for there is hardly one at all, only a skin of clothing trembling in the air, his deflated ankles withering away to nothing where they meet some worn shoes full of character and strongly drawn—sits burning with furious thoughts, his head just a fierce, pink glow. The ghostly outlines of fingers (again, paint gives way to drawing), loose and limber, seem to draw on a sketch pad, the little finger poised to hold the hand delicately aloft from the page as an artist might. A carved thread of line floats out of the page, inflating into a scribbled cloud—but even this web of lines belies an assured hand, able to exert lively control despite the force needed to cut into lino, despite the reversed direction of such a tool compared to the brush. This haze should be airy and insubstantial and seeming to come forward, and reads so in the context; but is provocatively flat, sharp and submerged in the

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buckled surface, physically rejecting all visual assumptions. From this abruptly two-dimensional fog, a fluidly-painted, mutely-coloured male torso with slick, shining skin slides (upside-down) into a cardboard box. The boxes likewise defy space, though all the tools of illusion of depth are employed. A visual feast of textures vies with our comprehension of illusory space, with planes of the cartons variously scratched out, scraped, or heavily laden with mottled paint.

We sense that all this apparent violence against the painting—the scratchy, indistinct figures, the heavy daubs of paint that take on an agonising reality in their protrusion from the surface, the deep gouges in the lino—is invoked to a deeper purpose. The figures themselves are struggling to come to life, to rip and tear and ooze their way out of the flat two-dimensional prison in which the very medium of paint confines them. Von Kaufmann is merely trying his best to help his creations come to life, tearing open, re-stitching, surgically extending his works into the third dimension in a desperate effort to let his ghosts out into the world. Sometimes, when his distortions of the canvas body itself run to extremes — as in his recent *Der Gefährte* where straining heads are actually sculpted from flat painted strips of plastic — he takes on the role of an obsessed Dr Frankenstein, and his creations threaten to really

enter our world.



(c) 2016 Ruprecht von Kaufmann (oil on linoleum) – Courtesy Galerie Crone

And one must also mention the patterns. Flat, geometric patterns that embellish the surface by infinitely subtle colour and tonal variations. We are continuously shaken from our three-dimensional illusions by these happy odes to the flat surface. We shift between three-dimensions and two with disconcerting ease by means of these decorative patterns. And, in a feat of technical integration, von

Kaufmann sometimes paints their broad shapes, sometimes merely carves them as linear echoes, our eyes having to work hard to find the disjunct. This control over so many elements, both physical and visual, formal properties of composition, atmospheric effects, makes von Kaufmann a formidable painter. He experiments, but not to shock us: rather, he generously accommodates us, working to integrate traditional elements and unexpected ones alike into seamless images.



Our suggestion that von Kaufmann's works are a struggle between dimensions might deserve some words of explanation. The charming book *Flatland: A Romance of Many Dimensions* by English schoolmaster Edwin Abbott Abbott, relates a scene in which a three-dimensional sphere explains his existence to a two-dimensional square:

*'I am not a plane Figure, but a Solid. ... When I cut through your plane as I am now doing, I make in your plane a section which you, very rightly, call a Circle. For even a Sphere—which is my proper name in my own country—if he manifest himself at all to an inhabitant of Flatland—must needs manifest himself as a Circle. Do you not remember, I say, how, when you entered the realm of Lineland, you were compelled to manifest yourself to the King not as a Square, but as a Line, because that Linear Realm had not Dimensions enough to represent the whole of you, but only a slice or section of you? In precisely the same way, your country of Two Dimensions is not spacious enough to represent me, a being of Three, but can only exhibit a slice or section of me, which is what you call a Circle.'*

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The secret behind von Kaufmann's partially-rendered figures, with their hands, limbs, and sometimes heads disembodied or invisible, is not unlike the grin of the Cheshire cat in *Alice in Wonderland*—it is a clue that we gaze upon beings whose essential existence lies outside the flat surface. The claustrophobia that permeates many of von Kaufmann's pictures is masterfully conveyed through elements that are constant and repetitive. He uses the same opaque colours



over and over, pressing in on all sides, and rigid abstract spaces that leave no room for life. All invention and novelty spring from the beings within the spaces, who seem to use every means available to them to try and escape from their perpetual limbo. The price is often high — a fantasy made into reality can become ugly, and the faces and bodies of von Kaufmann's figures melt and scar when they are rendered in thick paint, often just escaping the edges of the frame. The ghosts of older von Kaufmann paintings (which can still be called 'paintings' in the usual sense) evoke sympathy and sadness, seemingly lost in their flat prison cells. The figures of recent work inspire rather a feeling of fascination and fear, as we watch them slowly being born into the three-dimensional world, in ways that are sometimes transcendental and sometimes gory, but all of which affirm their independent life. We timorously beg von Kaufmann to stop before it's too late—to keep the gate closed.



*Kapriole* (c) 2016 Ruprecht von Kaufmann (oil on linoleum) – Courtesy Galerie Crone

The flying steed in *Kapriole* seems a triumphant transgressor of the plane — the outline almost suggests an empty space left behind by a real horse that now roams about somewhere in the gallery. In its wake, even the clouds have become dislodged and stand out, physically removed from the canvas, glued to it only by the paint. The dimensional tension is comparatively more subdued in

*Berührungspunkt.* The two figures here remain confined to their world, she looking wistfully behind, while he looks sadly the other way. Each perhaps contemplates a different route out of the canvas, but he, slumped in his armchair, seems more resigned to his prison. She is blown by a fitful wind that draws her towards the light, but is paused in the motion of turning, only by holding on to his hand.



*Berührungspunkt* (c) 2016 Ruprecht von Kaufmann (oil on linoleum) – Courtesy Galerie Crone

We'll give von Kaufmann the final word:

*‘Often ideas become more clear while I am working on them, and sometimes the idea will change as it evolves on the canvas. That is also a reason why I don’t use models or photos as reference. They tend to trap you in whatever reference material you have, and force you to stick to your initial plan to the bitter end. However there often is a certain point, when the painting develops a life of its own, and demands of you to change your mind, to surrender and follow its guidance.’*





*Der Sammler (c) 2016 Ruprecht von Kaufmann (gouache on paper) – Courtesy Galerie Crone*

*This paper was written in collaboration with physicist Dr Jacques Pienaar.*

Abbott, Edwin Abbott. 1884. *Flatland: A romance of many dimensions*. Seeley & Co, London.