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Peter Wächtler

Ad Astra

August 31 until November 17, 2019
Media Conference: Friday, August 30, 2019, 10am
Opening: Friday, August 30, 2019, 6pm

Media Release

What makes us recognize good art? The fact that it is shown at a Kunsthalle? That it is expensive and beats auction records? That it is being collected? That celebrities buy it? That magazines feature it? That we understand it? Or that we, precisely, do not understand it? That it demonstrates skill? That it is beautiful and we like it? That it goes viral and is commented upon globally? That it provokes and inspires? All of these questions could be answered in the positive with regard to Peter Wächtler's art, yet it also seems indifferent those criteria.

Peter Wächtler, born in Hannover, Germany, in 1979, lives and works in Berlin. He writes texts, produces films, draws, paints pictures, and makes sculptures and objects. The human figure is central to all of his work. It appears in various forms, attitudes, poses, and interactions, just as it does in real life. Peter Wächtler's artwork betrays neither fear of figuration—nor any undue trust in it. Here, the figure is not, as so often, revered and exalted, but it is also not critiqued or satirized in endless grotesques. It is, quite simply, inescapable, and it strides or stumbles, it is being manipulated and defeated; it overestimates itself and yet cannot be overrated. This is just as tragic as it is comical, and it is this inner tension that Wächtler's oeuvre devotes itself to. Yet the commitment to this uneasy balance of the tragicomic is easier announced than it is accomplished... or, for us as viewers, tolerated.

Today we find ourselves in an era where the human body has become the subject of passionate discussion—in debates around gender, identity politics, or with regard to artificial intelligence. In this context it may feel unsettling that Wächtler's work, in a seemingly old-fashioned manner, renders homage to the human figure: that wretched thing on its existential journey into the unknown, lost between self-doubt, exaltation, and irony. Ah, yes, those were the times! Except that those times never existed. Fact is, that now and then Wächtler's art plays with our emotions—when it attracts and then immediately withdraws again, as if it didn't trust in anything, least of all itself. Or perhaps we are not approaching things from the right angle? Should we take a more distanced approach to this work? Rather than talking about "the human figure," "stories," or "atmosphere," how about if we were to discuss "rhetoric," "analysis," or "metaphor" instead? For here we are confronted with a pictorial world that expertly manipulates language, that messes with presentation just as it does with artificiality—and then adds in a healthy dose of a kind of crotchety objectivity. Sure, superficially one could draw a connection between Wächtler's work and German romanticism or the golden era of the Weimar Republic, or one could locate it in relationship to the output of an artist such as Otto Dix. But that would be relying on a stance of all-too-comfortable nostalgia. Because, more than perhaps immediately apparent, Wächtler's artwork is committed to the contemporary moment, to its confusion, its wishes and uncertainties, which Wächtler pursues by way of exhausted motifs: For it is easier to recognize oneself in the past and its outmoded expressions. As such, Wächtler's art consistently observes itself in the act of formation—ecstatically, incredulously, with abandon, and a sense of embarrassment.

Ad Astra, Peter Wächtler's exhibition at Kunsthalle Zurich, features a recently completed film, and three expansive sculptural works.

Peter Wächtler will release the volume *Jolly Rogers* (2019). It emerged in the context of the artist's solo exhibition at Bergen Kunsthall at the beginning of 2019.

Thanks to the galleries dépendance, Brussels, Lars Friedrich, Berlin, Reena Spaulings, New York, and The Antonio Dalle Nogare Foundation, Bolzano

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