

# STEFANIE HEINZE IS REORDERING REALITY



Evading classification, the German artist revels in disorienting her viewers with her exquisite oil paintings.

By Chiara Di Leone

**“Welcome to my prison!”** Stefanie Heinze greets me before we climb the circular stairs to her large studio space nestled in a Kottbusser Tor courtyard in Kreuzberg, Berlin. I turn around for a moment to gaze outside of the large windows, and when I look back she is nowhere to be seen: Heinze, 25, disappears behind one of the massive canvases resting on the stained walls, the artworks turning one by one as if they have just acquired lives of their own while she attempts to place them in the right orientation. I am still pleasantly disoriented, though—a feeling that you slowly become accustomed to when looking at her work.

Her deliberately insubordinate paintings are a committed and joyful exploration of escapism. “It’s about going constantly around the corner; it is a very consciously evasive process,” Heinze says of her practice. “The way I draw is very conscious, though. I do a line and a shape and then I say OK, I am leaving, bye.” But what exactly is she avoiding? When asked, Heinze answers confidently: history. “History and classification,” the artist clarifies, and “the well-known ways to interpret images.” This antagonism to the stiffness that comes with being bulked together with the similar could easily be dismissed as ahistorical, a resistance toward being overlooked by being understood and therefore wanting to impose oneself above the rest. But one must resist this reading and keep looking. It is worth it. In spite of resisting facile references, order, and linear interpretations, Heinze’s work revels in precision, which is detectable in her intentional lines and impeccable compositions.

More than this categorical rejection of order, she plays with classification by creating work that lives uncannily in between histories, like the Eastern Bloc, where she was born and raised; art movements like Surrealism; forms like automatic drawing; and people like her accomplished teachers at the Academy of Fine

(Continued)

“My works evoke confusion, which is something we can all relate to. But it is a confusion that I put in order.”



Arts Leipzig, where she studied. There are surrealist elements in there, too, but though one can observe semi-recognizable shapes melting into one another, her subjects are not dreamlike: they are ordinary, at times domestic, and very often mundane. The elements in these compositions are almost never intact, and are often mixed with one another in monstrous and joyful emotional landscapes. Just like tender monsters, her canvases are meant to break the order of things, resisting figuration and challenging what we believe to be real, fixed, and stable. These are works about change: they play the role of messing with reality by disembodiment and assembling it again in unlikely ways.

There is a certain equality in both Heinze’s subjects and the intended, imagined, and perhaps conjured audiences of her work. Just like a dog, a banana, body parts, and a striped tape can all live on the same 2-D plane, her audiences are invited to take part in the conversation. “My works evoke confusion, which is something we can all relate to,” says the artist. “But it is a confusion that I put in order.” Questions of gender surface through the formal, procedural aspects of the art-making process while eluding the familiar discourses around patriarchy. It is deliberately indeterminate work: her pictorial vocabulary gives us a language that affords new ways of seeing the world, ways that are not prescriptive, that invite suspicion, that long

for questions rather than answers. In this sense, Heinze’s insecurity is a progressive force, rather than a hindrance—it can be domesticated. “It comes from my experience of being lost as a child and building an island through drawing and painting,” she explains.

Heinze keeps building her islands in and outside of Berlin. In the summer of 2022 she temporarily relocated to Castel Caramel, a prestigious artist residency and cultural platform in the South of France. The site sits atop a hill on the Côte d’Azur, minutes away from Monaco. It once served as a remote atelier to the Austrian artist Ernst Fuchs before it became host to an official program in 2018. Founded by London-based art advisor and curator Maria-Theresia Mathisen, the residency continues the tradition of its originator by inviting prominent contemporary artists to work there each summer. During her time, Heinze focused on two large-scale oil paintings that echo the vastness of the pristine surroundings in the South of France, which stand in stark contrast with her usual Kottbusser Tor working environment. The abundance of natural light and her encounters with the living world at Castel Caramel played a key role in shaping these pieces: earthen elements abound on the canvas, ranging from dolphin mouths to dog parts to deep-green backgrounds.

This fall Heinze debuts the results of the residency in her new exhibition at Capitain Petzel in Berlin, entitled “Dimensions of the Fool.” If the hero’s journey is the established and patriarchal way of progressing linearly through life, her trajectory is closer to that of another archetypal figure—the fool. Foolishness and openness are qualities the artist links to coming from a place of curiosity, uncertainty, and “seeing what happens.” In Heinze’s words: “The fool is just there to nudge, to show that there is another world. The fool does not have a mission. I believe in wild cards, literally.”

Far from the prison the artist jokingly inhabits, Heinze’s real world is a place where desires and differences open up “different mechanisms to deal with insecurity and fears.” Her work conjures systems to escape what is—in her eyes—outdated, and imprints a joyful exploration on canvas that keeps the viewer guessing and wanting more.

*“Dimensions of the Fool” is on view at Capitain Petzel from until December 23, 2022, at Karl-Marx-Allee 45 Berlin, Germany.*

PHOTOGRAPHY BY BILLIE CLARKEN COURTESY OF CAPITAIN PETZEL, BERLIN.