

HYPERALLERGIC

ART • WEEKEND

Milena Büsch's Large Paintings Parody Consumer Culture

These deceptively decorative works critique the conventions and implied values of the classic bourgeois interior.

Max L. Feldman August 10, 2019



Milena Büsch, "Biene Maja / Maya blau" (2018), oil on carpet, 59.055 × 77.953 inches (all images courtesy of the artist and FELIX GAUDLITZ, Vienna, photography: kunst-dokumentation.com)

Perhaps the worst thing you can say about an exhibition in Vienna is "it was nice" or "I liked it" or "darling, it's magnificent." In my native British English, calling something "nice" would be at best non-committal and at worst an insult. In Vienna, however, being polite allows the city and its institutions, both very conservative, to carry on as always. It also reinforces the sycophantic hierarchies Vienna's art world has taken up from the Habsburg empire: flattering people who think they are your superiors is just another game adapted from the imperial court.

Since opening his gallery in November 2018, Felix Gaudlitz has made no such concessions. The five exhibitions Gaudlitz has mounted since he opened his Werdertorgasse space have been divisive. The aggressively spare displays by little known artists (for example, Vera Lutz, Knut Ivar Aaser, and Simon Lässig) made demands the Viennese scene is not used to. The press-texts, meanwhile, have made no attempt to spoon-feed information to viewers, most limited to only a few words printed in a small typeface on an otherwise blank sheet of white printer paper. While provoking some negative reactions, though they

would never dare make themselves heard, the young gallerist has injected some new energy into the city. In doing so, he has opened up a space where people can disagree instead of once again expressing empty congratulations.

Frankfurt-based Milena Büsch's solo exhibition, *Battle Royale* consists of three huge (roughly four- to six-foot) oil paintings on carpet: “*Biene Maja/Maya Blau*” (2018) and “*Teppich mit Kreismuster – Moda 1062 Schwarz*” and “*Doftranka*” (both 2019). Büsch's sparse installation and unorthodox materials are in keeping with the gallery's previous exhibitions; the press release, likewise, reads only, “Battle banal.”

The exhibition does not depart from Gaudlitz's cerebral approach, yet, comparatively, it is a maximalist feast for the senses. The historical references built into the titles of these labor-intensive works and the story of how they were transported to Vienna (some were apparently still wet when shipped) are just as important as their imagery and materials. Embedded in *Battle Royale* is a critique of the conventions and implied values of the classic bourgeois interior *inside a bourgeois interior*.

“*Biene Maja/Maya Blau*” is a repeated pattern of happy cartoon bees pollinating plants and frolicking in blue flowerbeds, against a blue background. The title refers to the popular Japanese-German children's cartoon *Biene Maja* (*Maya the Bee*), based on Waldemar Bonsels's book series, as well as Maya blue, the bright blue weather-resistant pigment found in art and artifacts from pre-Columbian Mesoamerican cultures. The almost-rhyming connection to *Biedermeier*, a furniture and interior decoration style with strong Viennese associations, cannot be a coincidence, though.

If it isn't, then Büsch's reference to the *Biedermeier* era—between the 1815 Congress of Vienna, which marked the end of the Napoleonic Wars, and the 1848 revolutions, when nationalist revolts threatened the Habsburg Empire—becomes something more sophisticated: a critique of the historical images permitted by the Austrian tourist board and right-wing politicians. This is only emphasised by the *Maya the Bee* imagery itself, suggestive of childlike regression tactics. By placing lightweight imagery on materials dense with connotations, and piled with so many layers of paint, “*Biene Maja/Maya Blau*” parodies how the revolutionary hopes of the rising bourgeoisie have been reduced to petit bourgeois consumer goods, such as nostalgic T-shirts or the Mayan-inspired novelty items that can be found in Vienna's many “exotic” and ethnographic shops.



Milena Büsch, "Teppich mit Kreismuster – Moda 1062 Schwarz" (2019), oil on carpet, 63.386 × 46.850 inches

While Büsch's joyful little bees show how the stately, utilitarian order of *Biedermeier* can be turned into something far more garish, "Teppich mit Kreismuster – Moda 1062 Schwarz" — six intersecting white, silver, blue, green, and red circles against a black background — addresses the diminishing returns of a most revolutionary art movement, constructivism.

"Teppich mit Kreismuster" recalls the work of Lyubov Popova, who rejected representational art for a new, industrial visual language. By transposing Popova's spare "painterly architectonics" onto carpet, Büsch turns them into a merely generic abstract design. In doing so, she points to how cosmic revolutionary geometry can only take us so far now that

such motifs have made their way onto IKEA's salesroom floor. Whether Büsch knows carpets became an important interior design feature in Soviet homes in the 1960s, used to cover upholstery, as floor coverings, or displayed on walls, and even outlived communism itself, is another matter.



Milena Büsch, "Doftranka" (2019), oil on carpet, 151.969 × 76.378 inches

"Doftranka," the third painting, is named after the Swedish word for *Stephanotis floribunda*, a flowering plant native to Madagascar, which is often found in bridal bouquets. The painting does not show us what the plant looks like. Instead, we see the sun peeking through bulbous clouds and colliding with raindrops. This could, like "Biene Maja/Maya Blau," refer to the toxic demand for "exotic" cultural goods, since

Stephanotis floribunda requires tropical climate conditions, or point to bright new days promised by the revolutions of the past that nobody thinks are coming any time soon.

Milena Büsch continues at Felix Gaudlitz in Vienna (Werdertorgasse 4/2/13 1010) until August 31.