

FRIEDRICH KUNATH:

THE TEMPTATION TO EXIST (MAY CONTAIN NUTS)

ANDREA ROSEN GALLERY | MARCH 15 – APRIL 26, 2014

BY SARAH GOFFSTEIN

What do rainbow file folders, a scratching post, and German Romantic painting have in common?

This sounds like the beginning of a riddle, but these things are part of the rebus that is Friedrich Kunath's latest exhibition at the Andrea Rosen Gallery. The initial soft squish of wall-to-wall carpeting underfoot transforms the space while offering the promise of a *Gesamtkunstwerk*. Casting a wide net, this L.A.-based German artist brings together both geographies in paintings and sculpture with obvious juxtapositions between German Romanticism and American image culture. The show features four intersecting bodies of work that read as a veritable encyclopedia of kitsch.

Lifted imagery from art history, such as Romantic landscapes and objects from Northern Baroque still life paintings, overshadow Kunath's penchant for biographical content. His compositional devices parallel the early Pop works of James Rosenquist. Like in "President Elect" (1960 – 61/1964), where John F. Kennedy's face, a pair of hands serving cake, and a hot red automobile cleverly intersect, Kunath has a keen eye for visual puns and preserving a clear connection to his sources. His notational appropriation strategies also suggest a family resemblance to David Salle's history paintings in *Tapestries/Battles/Allegories* at

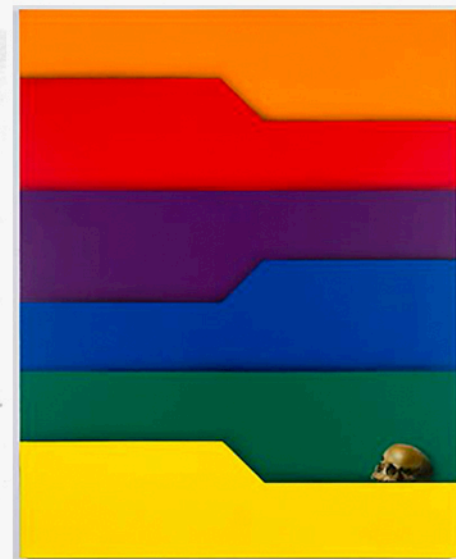
Lever House, with both artists utilizing disparate styles and art historical motifs as a grab-bag of raw material. In Kunath's work, this is particularly calculated as a conceptual agenda that brings montage into a place that is thoroughly domestic and playful. Brightly hued wall-to-wall carpeting is the first indicator that automatically transforms the gallery space into a place where his work can be "at home." (Rumor has it that if you arrive at the right time during gallery hours, you may even witness a cleaning lady vacuuming.)

The show-stoppers here are works from the series of acrylic and oil paintings, *I was thinking about what a friend said, and hoping it was a lie* (2013 – 14). These six large, identically sized canvases immediately draw attention due to the chromatic intensity of their rainbow stripes. At first glance they quote the hard-edged works of Frank Stella. Upon closer examination, the modeling of each color stripe begins to resemble the fast food vinyl décor of another era, migrating in an implied ziggurat from one painting to the next. The abstraction inherent in those stripes coheres into top-tab folders on a scale that flirts with becoming a sort of domesticated sublime. Emerging out of one such "folder" in each of the paintings is a *trompe l'oeil* object of Baroque vintage, such as a memento mori skull or extinguished candle.

All of these pieces feature vignettes of meticulously copied Romantic paintings by the likes of Caspar David Friedrich and Martin Johnson Heade. They are combined with appropriated cartoons and sometimes hack photo-derived pencil drawings. One of the strongest is "I Still Owe You for the Hole in My Heart" (2014), which contains a delicate graphite contour drawing of two women seated in a light embrace, possibly originating from a Matisse sketchbook. It is hard to see from a distance, due to a painted image of a saccharine mountain sunrise seared into the back of the figure seated closest to the viewer. Most notable here is the collision of various languages of appropriated imagery, generating a tension that was not as fully achieved in previous paintings by this artist.

Atypical for Kunath, an artist known for working across media, 2-D imagery dominates this show. The few sculptures included are restrained. Unlike another recent exhibition, you will not find a banana playing the trumpet, but there are multi-tiered scratching posts (the kind designed for cats), that loosely resemble certain pieces by Isamu Noguchi. Upholstered with "oriental" carpets, the silliness of the feline furniture resides in its absurd opulence. It only tenuously connects to the paintings with a few shared threads; one is the transformation of luxury objects ("high art" and artisanal carpets) into the mundane functionality of everyday life. Here kitty towers serve as funky pedestals for still life, particularly sculptures of watermelon in various stages of being consumed. They also poke fun at the lengths to which informed artists must go to reinvent the pedestal these days.

Finally, in the back galleries lurk a series of yellow-drenched sunset/sunrise paintings



Friedrich Kunath, "I was thinking about what a friend had said, I was hoping it was a lie (Skull)." Acrylic and oil on canvas, 79 × 63 × 1½. Photograph by Josh White.

with titles likely derived from song lyrics about love. Most reviews, catalogue essays, and press releases about Kunath emphasize melancholy and existential crises. To this critic, these themes are subsumed by the artist's methods of appropriation. The fact that quotations from other artists and song lyrics abound in Kunath's work leaves one wondering about the boundary between our culture of consumption and something altogether more personal.

"Somewhere in these oppositions lies the aesthetic possibility of slipping on a banana peel."

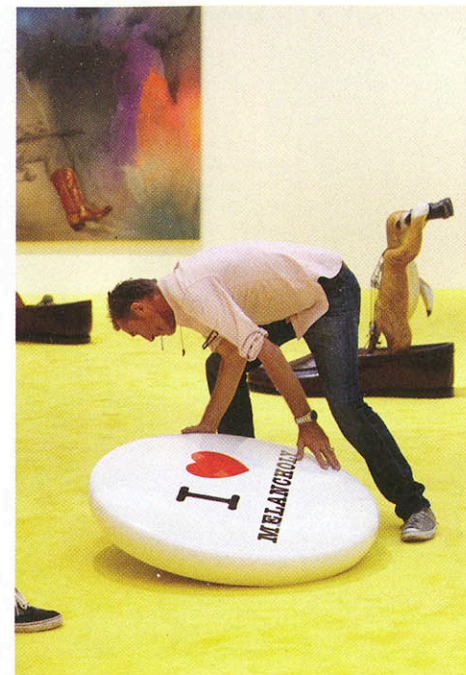
—Friedrich Kunath

CLOSE-UP

For Real

ALISON M. GINGERAS

ON FRIEDRICH KUNATH'S *YOU OWE ME A FEELING* (2012)



Below: Page detail from Friedrich Kunath's *You Owe Me a Feeling* (Blum & Poe, 2012).

Right: Page from Friedrich Kunath's *You Owe Me a Feeling* (Blum & Poe, 2012).



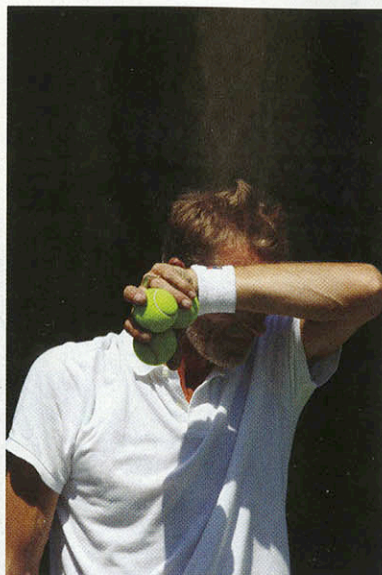
EVERYDAY LIFE IS FULL OF VOIDS: the suspended nowhere of idling in traffic, the serpentine line at the post office, the dreary waiting room at the dentist's, 3:00 AM insomnia. The creators of Instagram seem to have found a lucrative niche in these "empty" spaces throughout our circadian slog. More than just a means to fend off boredom or banality, the mobile photo feed proffers a temporary visual lifeline out of the abyss of anxiety and existential dread that can quickly overtake these vacant periods—images of voids to fill the void. "Idle hands are the devil's workshop": Today's popular *passe-temps* is designed to thwart or at least divert Satan's complots, albeit with filtered images and phantom communications that will eventually dissipate into the ether.

Killing time with my iPhone in the predawn hours, I stumbled on artist Friedrich Kunath's Instagram account and found the cover image of art historian James Elkins's rather unorthodox 2001 book, *Pictures and Tears: A History of People Who Have Cried in Front of Paintings*, illustrated with an alluring detail of a tearful eye of the Virgin—Dieric Bouts's *Mater*

Right: Photograph from Friedrich Kunath's Instagram feed of a fund-raising tennis tournament for the MAK Center for Art and Architecture, Sheats-Goldstein House, Beverly Hills, CA, October 26, 2013.

Below: Spread from Friedrich Kunath's *You Owe Me a Feeling* (Blum & Poe, 2012).





A cologne called "No Matter What"

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Two pages from Friedrich Kunath's *You Owe Me a Feeling* (Blum & Poe, 2012).



It took forever to get home

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dolorosa, ca. 1460. A sucker for the Our Lady of Sorrows genre, I was immediately compelled to track down Elkins's study chronicling viewers' emotional responses to paintings. As I'd recently become obsessed with one of Kunath's artist's books, this sparked a conceptual chain reaction of thoughts about ways to grapple with time through images, art, and affect.

Kunath's *You Owe Me a Feeling* (2012) is visually seductive, mysterious yet insightful, and often very droll—a narrative sequence of staged photographs and concrete poems that form a melancholic tale for our current moment. A collaboration between Kunath (whose paintings and sculptures serve as backdrops and props for the story), songwriter and poet David Berman (best known for his cult band Silver Jews), and photographer Michael Schmelling, *You Owe Me a Feeling* unfolds with all the distinctive reverie of a *ciné-roman*.

An enigmatic and endearing portrait of the artist emerges from its pages—in the mode of “semi-classic semi-fiction,” to quote one of Berman's aphoristic lines. The artist character is based on Kunath himself, not only incorporating trademark imagery from his artwork (romantic sunsets, emotive animals, penny loafers) but also depicting personal obsessions and hobbies such as tennis (also visible on Instagram). To dispel any confusion with “truthful” autobiography, Kunath is portrayed by the ruggedly handsome former model Rudy Verwey. As a projection of a future, older Kunath, his doppelgänger is likewise, in real life, a European gentleman who is expatriated in the sunny dystopia that is upper-class Los Angeles.

Depicted primarily as a solitary figure, the artist in *You Owe Me a Feeling* performs both creative “work” (in a gallery, in his studio, holding a palette and crumpled paint tubes and looking contemplatively into the distance) and SoCal-style “play” (on the beach, on a sailboat, on a tennis court, driving a white Porsche convertible). With no pretense to documentary, but with a definite nod to pastiche, each lush image is precisely staged to heighten both the artifice and the sentimentality of its narrative vignette. We see “Kunath” lovingly cradling a grinning (then crying) foam-and-resin orange, gingerly positioning a large pin that reads I ♥ MELANCHOLY, and wading into the Pacific carrying a disconnected landline telephone. While there's no clear plot or resolution, “Kunath's” journey is united by themes of existential emptiness and emotional malaise, propelled by the search for meaning (despite the nihilistic futility of that exercise). “Sadness is not coterminous with hopelessness,” “The tennis court is a graph of atheism,” “Depression is the only way God / can contact some of us”: Berman's words act as a fragmented libretto for Kunath's wry fable of contemporary existence and of the quest for tangible affect.

That “Kunath's” quixotic search for empathetic connection happens in the midst of all the Tinseltown fakery is the very point of this tale.

If taken at face value, Kunath and “Kunath” might be accused of celebrating their self-indulgent, first-world problems; *You Owe Me a Feeling* could be dismissed as an ironic ode to dissatisfaction and discontent against the deadpan backdrop of La-La Land affluence. Yet a literal interpretation of the narrative misses the point. When understood as allegory, this book becomes so much more: It asks questions about the very function of art in life, posing it as exactly that contradictory link between the artificial object and the interior sensation.

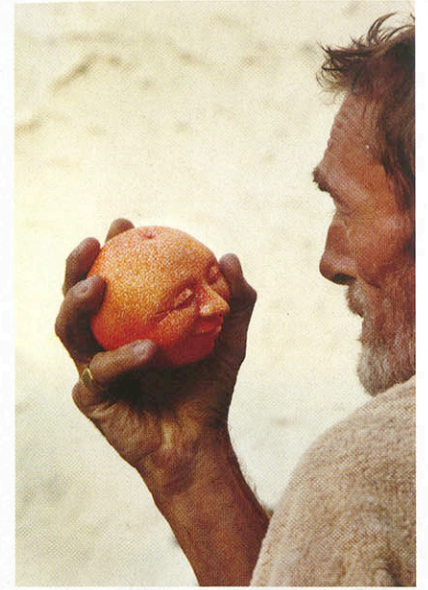
When actors in a tragedy feign weeping on-screen or on stage, there is nothing to stop the audience from responding with genuine tears. Likewise, *You Owe Me a Feeling* strikes a sincere chord through its strategic insincerity, its mimicry of our daily struggle with real life's voids—producing (at least in this reader) profound sentiment and revelation in its detachment from detachment. Art itself owes us a feeling. Kunath asks us to consider the affective function of art both virtually and physically—rather than focus exclusively on its sociopolitical or historical use-value.

I have even come to regard *You Owe Me a Feeling* as a contemporary incarnation of the *Andachtsbild*—a medieval genre of religious artmaking that is, in Elkins's description, “specifically intended to produce an intense emotional experience.” While we might not literally cry while turning the pages of Kunath's book, it prods us out of our stoic scrolling and blasé voyeurism—challenging us to flee the mirage-filled desert of twenty-first-century life. “O I have walked inside oil paintings,” writes Berman—echoing the way in which the intense, private contemplation of an *andachtsbild* can make the viewer experience feelings identical to the sorrow depicted in the image. This devotional identification was reincarnated anew in the roiling natural world depicted by the Romantics during the nineteenth century. And now we have an *andachtsbild* for our own attention-deficit-riddled era: That Berman's text is overlaid on a photograph of “Kunath” walking in the surf, “talking” on his outmoded landline, only heightens this allegory—for here is the sublime of Caspar David Friedrich's *Monk by the Sea* reimagined for a secular age, with vintage phone and perfectly distressed jeans. If Instagram is an ocean of manufactured desire—or is, to apply a line from Berman's text as its slogan, “where / boredom / meets / longing”—Kunath has created a contemporary book of devotions that gives us pause, his lachrymal orange just as oddly touching as it is real. □

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You Owe Me a Feeling strikes a sincere chord through its strategic insincerity, its mimicry of our daily struggle with real life's voids.



Clockwise from top left: Two page details and spread from Friedrich Kunath's *You Owe Me a Feeling* (Blum & Poe, 2012).



HAMMER

Q & A WITH ARTIST FRIEDRICH KUNATH

This interview was conducted by electronic mail. Questions were composed by the Hammer's multimedia fellow Sasha Mann. Look for more information on Friedrich Kunath's Hammer Project here.



The artist in his studio.

SM: Where does the text in your work come from?

FK: Mostly it's a mix of fractions from books, poems and lyrics, where I add or subtract some words in order to reach another higher or lower sense. Sometimes it's just a word flying around the room and all I had to do was catch it.

SM: Can you talk about the contrast between the bright, psychedelic washes of color and the stark silhouettes of the figures?

FK: I don't really know where that comes from and I'm trying hard not to find out. Maybe I'm in the middle of my personal West Coast fever dream.

SM: How has your time in Los Angeles shaped your work? Do you draw from imagery you find in LA? Which pieces, if any, harken to your life in Germany?

FK: Well, I guess the colors got brighter and the topics got darker. Sunshine and Noir. I live in a city where imagination meets reality and where the collective dreams of the world are being manufactured. It's a fantastic and inspiring place to work and it helps me to go further into the back of my mind and take the elevator down to my heart. Edward Abbey summed it up nicely: "There is science, logic, reason; there is thought verified by experience, and then there is California."

SM: When or how did you discover you wanted to become an artist?

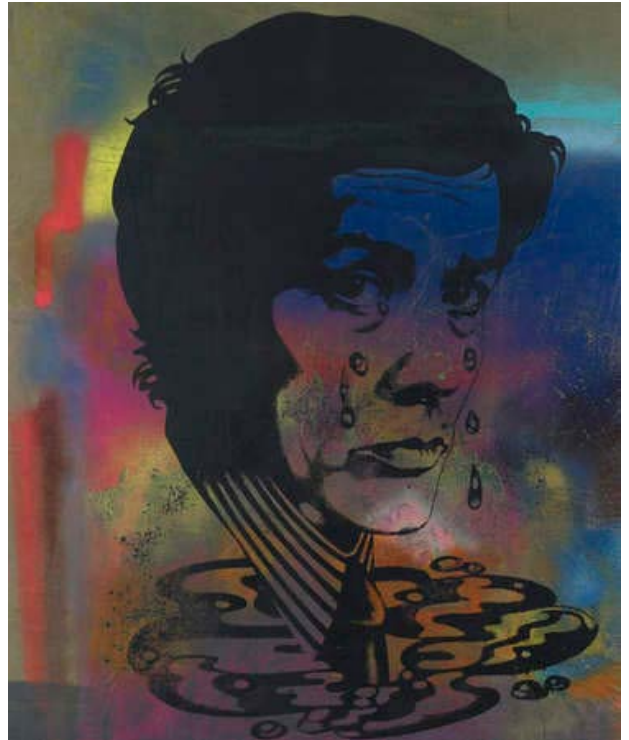
FK: Do you ever decide that? Plus, what defines an artist? And what does it take to be an artist? I can only refer to Werner Herzog, who said that the only artists left are those working in the circus. It might sound pathetic but I believe art chooses you and ideally you are in it for a gradual and lifelong construction of wonder and serenity.

SM: Alain Curtis (Disco) has a pop art sensibility to it. Are you inspired by any specific precedents?

FK: That's basically a hybrid fantasy image from French actor Alain Delon and American actor Tony Curtis. It lends a face to all these fragmented characters in the Hammer show. Sensibility yes, pop art, no.

SM: Can you talk about the pair of sneakers and the stream of birds that accompanies them? To me the piece evokes a nostalgia for boyhood. I wonder whether the empty sneakers symbolize an empty man or an invisible boy within the man.

FK: I liked the idea of transforming an everyday object, like the shoelaces we touch every morning, into a romantic projection of ourselves and our desires to disappear. I thought of this scene where someone is tying his shoes and literally his thoughts materialize into birds flying away... It almost had this subtext of "the dreamer is the realist of today."



The artist's Alain Curtis (Disco), 2009.



Hammer Projects: Friedrich Kunath. Installation view at the Hammer Museum, Los Angeles. Photo courtesy of Joshua White.

REVIEWS: USA

A crowd of cast-off statuettes hangs precariously from the ceiling: a bevy of knick-knacks, a smattering of paddywhacks, the occasional bone. It's like a psychedelic Haim Steinbach rampaged in your grandmother's hoard of collectable figurines and in a flight of fancy decided the only appropriate place for them was of course on the ceiling. Or rather, a ceiling in Los Angeles.

A kind of sweet psychedelia pervades *EMOH*, the newest exhibition by German-born artist Friedrich Kunath. Kunath's work has long been about longing. His first show in LA since moving here from Cologne has all the sadly funny twist and emotion of previous work, but this time mixed with the joy of wanderlust and the sense of finding a new home, plus a sunshiny and quietly jokey SoCal psychedelic. Old-timey drawings are painted in black over huge colour-wash paintings like marbled tie-dyes or light shows at a happening, the connections loose at best. Perhaps we call things psychedelic when they're surreal without the menacing back-stories of Oedipal melting clocks or easily interpreted dream sequences. There are no such Freudian directives here.

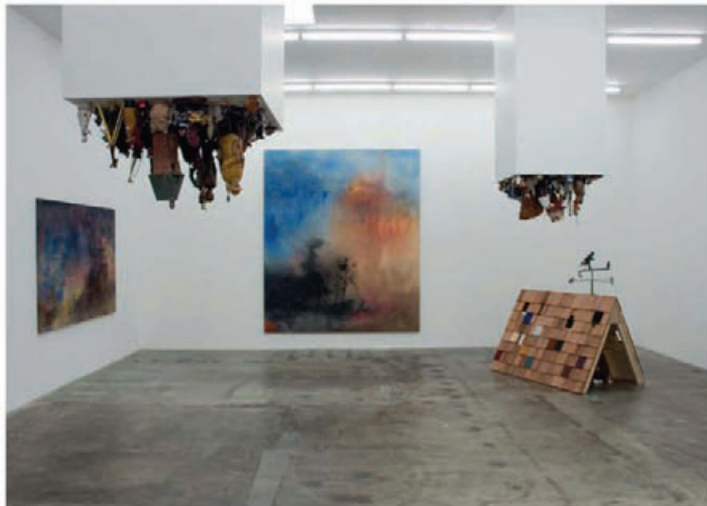
The title of the exhibition, 'home' spelled backwards, in case you hadn't noticed, plays with the unfamiliarity and strangeness of something that ought to be most familiar. At the entrance to both galleries sits a snail, its slithering tongue of a body cast in bronze, its shell a modernist house cast in different 1960s pastels. Kunath's recent move makes all these possessions somehow poignant, though no less pleasantly absurd. In another sculpture, the constructed roof of a house rises only a few feet from the ground and is stocked with seemingly innocuous tchotchkes, which if the press release is to be believed are objects that give Kunath a sense of home.

Friedrich's work is a little sad, a little wistful, a little silly, difficult to dislike. Much of it borrows from the treasure trove of pop culture, often directly citing pop songs as inspiration, but this show references found photographs of various unrelated phenomena, though a theme of travelling emerges out of a few. Each of these mostly black-and-white snaps is overlaid with found drawings, pulled from different period styles, though many seem drawn by the same hand.

But if Los Angeles is Kunath's new home, he seems to have settled aesthetically into it like a local. One of my favourite of the wonky washes has a page torn from a book of quotations overlaying it. In the kind of juxtaposition that makes all accidents seem portentous, especially for a recent transplant, the list of quotations begins with 'longing' and carries on through 'looks' to 'love', with 'Los Angeles' fitting neatly in the middle. Or as Ogden Nash writes, quoted on the painting, 'Yes, it is true. Los Angeles is not only erratic, not only erotic, Los Angeles is crotchety, centrifugal, vertiginous, esoteric, and exotic.' The same could quite easily be said of Kunath. *Andrew Berardini*

Friedrich Kunath
EMOH

Blum & Poe, Los Angeles
24 October - 6 December



EMOH, 2008 (installation view).
Photos: Heather Kaufmann.
Courtesy the artist, Blum & Poe,
Los Angeles, and BQ, Cologne



Friedrich Kunath
"Twilight"
2007
Mixed media
Installation view

Friedrich Kunath projected a multitude of obscure anxieties in his recent show at Andrea Rosen, but the greatest of all was surely stage fright. There was no stage, as such, only something like a dressing-room: all the objects and images that comprised the show were arranged within this dark, rather domestic diorama ('Twilight', 2007), which spread outwards and upwards as though it were only an effect of a long shadow cast by the entrance door at the near end. But one could see how the gallery could be read as a stage, as a space of exposure: it was as though the audience had hushed and Kunath had walked through the door, out of his lair and gone; the lights were on, but the show was over, and we were free to peek at the contents of his hideout, which is also his unconscious – and a very kooky one at that.

All the elements of the show were married exquisitely by 'Twilight', yet they were conceived as discrete art works. One construction (Untitled, 2007) consists of a monitor, showing footage of a boat at sea, suspended in a bathtub filled with water. East-West Germany (2007) is a divided wardrobe: one half ornate Victorian, the other functional modern; the two halves join to contain a pile of paintings. Where in the World Are You Now (2007) is also the product of a severance, this time of a piano, though here the whole is remade by a mirror fixed to the severed end. And in another rehearsal of the idea of halves and shadows, there is a table in the shape of a grand piano which

supports innumerable framed photographs of the backs of pedestrians' heads (Untitled, 2007). Other peculiarities included: an elongated stool, its legs being chewed by a stuffed beaver (Untitled, 2007); a high, stepped wooden construction, half of which has been marbled with coloured paint (Untitled, 2007); and a series of paintings of figures and birds and enclosures like caves. The mood was ghostly, but one sensed that Kunath was not long gone: prominent was a painting, *If the Phone Don't Ring, You'll Know It's Me* (2007), which depicts a figure whose body is barely visible except for an arm that wields a paintbrush and appears to be painting itself out of the picture.

Critics discussing the work of this young German have often whispered about love and melancholy and impossibility and the absurd, but none has yet called him a Surrealist. I don't see why: it's hardly an accusation of derivative redundancy. Indeed, if the success of the US television series *Six Feet Under* is anything to go by, innumerable stepchildren of the style are still vivid and meaningful. It is the magical avant-garde that Kunath wants to recapture. He wants to be Des Esseintes, secluded in his mansion in Joris-Karl Huysmans' *Against Nature* (1884), or Louis Aragon's avatar, wandering the streets in *Paris Peasant* (1926). There was, perhaps, a nod to the boulevards in Kunath's sequence of peculiarly scaled lightbulbs and street lamps – the street lamp tiny and the

lightbulb enormous (Untitled, 2006). There was even, maybe, a whiff of the rooftops in his hollow, rectangular construction of bricks (Untitled, 2007), which would be a chimney if it didn't have a CD stuck half-way out of the mortar.

But then Kunath has no manifesto, no declared Freudian programme, and one is left wondering what all this enjoyable mood-setting might mean. I was thinking about this when I came across an article by Michael Hirschorn in September's issue of *Atlantic Monthly*. He described an aesthetic that is 'an embrace of the odd against the blandly mainstream. It features mannered ingenuousness, an embrace of small moments, narrative randomness ...! Check, check, check, check, I thought, and was surprised. This is 'quirk', as Hirschorn defines it, a vein of affected oddity that he sees in Wes Anderson's films, Augusten Burroughs' memoirs and some of David Byrne's music, and which he argues – pushing things somewhat – is 'the ruling sensibility of Gen-X indie culture'. The avant-garde may be dead, but many still cherish the notion that artists speak from the margins of 'ruling sensibilities'. Kunath, at least, does not persuade me that they do.

Morgan Falconer

Friedrich Kunath

Two long, narrow rooms, right next to each other, both visible from the street through high windows—this was the setting of the installation by Cologne-based artist Friedrich Kunath at Galerie BQ. Although the two rooms could only be entered separately from the street, they were connected by one element: In the right-hand room, the flue pipe of a small green tiled stove went through the dividing wall and twisted around in the left-hand room. Apart from this pipe, however, the two juxtaposed spaces seemed to contain two completely different worlds.

Recent paintings by Kunath covered the entire right-hand wall of the right-hand room, which looked like the cozy living room of an older man. There were small shabby rugs on the floor, two lamps, the tiled stove, and three photographs on the wall behind the stove. The paintings, mostly watercolors on canvas, were of different sizes. Their faded colors lent them a nostalgic quality. Some of the paintings had a psychedelic look and contained phrases, such as *MAYBE NOT*, written backward. There was a slightly absurd lamp fitted with a conical lampshade that reached the floor. A sentence Kunath once read, “Sometimes darkness can give you the brightest light,” inspired him to create this lighting fixture that negates its function. The actual source of light in this room was an enormous yellowish lightbulb lying on one of the rugs.

This room might have evoked childhood memories, or perhaps slightly disturbing childhood nightmares. One photograph, *Untitled*, 2007, shows an elderly man sitting quietly at a set table while in the background a barn is consumed by flames; another pictured a stranded ship and a small cuddly dog running away from it. And then there was that strange stove, and the sculpture of an enormous matchstick standing on the window ledge, whose “shadow”—actually made of charred wood—looked like another, burned-down matchstick. This was a surreal place, even if the room also provided a certain slightly stuffy comfort.

The room next door was quite different. The flue pipe twisted and turned here, dominating the space like a Minimalist sculpture. A mathematical formula that refers to the construction of the pipe covered the entire front wall. Its severity was contradicted by a bicycle built for two, its front part in good condition, its rear section rusting away, bent and twisted. Like the matchstick and its charred shadow, this object combines the contradictory and the absurd. The bicycle was leaning against a wall covered by a huge painting of an exploding sunset, creating a dreamlike and hallucinatory feeling. Kunath has described his work as “psychedelic Minimalism,” a contradiction that also borders on the absurd.

But this installation was not about understanding; it was about creating personal worlds that comment on what is happening outside. “Today it is no longer possible to know everything,” according to Samuel Beckett. “The link between the self and the world of objects no longer exists.... We have to create our own worlds in order to fulfill our need for knowledge, in order to understand, to satisfy our need for order.” Maybe these two rooms, which I could well imagine as sets for a Beckett play, meant to evoke our universal need to know, albeit with an awareness that this desire can never be satisfied. The more we know, the more we slip into ignorance, into the abyss of absurdity. However, that bleak fact does not stop us, as the right-hand room of the installation showed, from creating cozy corners in the world.

—Noemi Smolik
Translated from German by Jane Brodie.

COLOGNE

Friedrich Kunath

GALERIE BQ



View of “Friedrich Kunath”, 2007

Flash Art

R E V I E W S

FRIEDRICH KUNATH

BLUM & POE

Friedrich Kunath's exhibition, ironically titled "I have always been here before" describes a complicated and oddly idiosyncratic version of the world. Sculpture and painting are fused into wonderfully inventive combinations, as Kunath engages us in simultaneously personal and political reverie, a visual treatise on the state of the world inside and out.

The strongest works in the show are the sculptures which constitute both a floor piece made from cut pieces of carpet that reference a grid of all the countries in Europe each distinguished by color, and a strangely comical stuffed crane walking on stilt-like legs across the gallery floor in a pair of oversized men's loafers. The bird leaves behind a trail of white footprints as it meanders in the direction of a diminutive, nearly suicidal bird house (any bird who went inside would surely find it difficult to reemerge) hung on the opposite wall and sporting an impossibly long ladder. The sense of the ridiculous is palpable here, and is in fact the quality that makes Kunath's work both so inviting and so oddly disturbing.

The painting "Untitled" is also very powerful. It shows a man holding up the side of a house with all his strength. This image might serve as a visual dictum for our time, one of hope and hopelessness, an impossible dream made real and falling in on the man who created it. Finally, Kunath is an artist whose work describes the personal machinations and concerns of his imagination as he, like us all, careens through life, intent on bridging the distance between himself and the world.

Eve Wood

Los Angeles Times

April 16, 2005 **F41**

Kunath does odd work, but well

German artist **Friedrich Kunath** employs a variety of mediums - painting, photography, sculpture, video - to a singular end. Fragmented experience thwarts a quietly desperate desire for human connection in this engaging work.

The fragmentation is physical. At Blum & Poe where the 30-year old artist is having his American solo debut, Kunath clusters small drawings and paintings in a group, much as Raymond Pettibon does. His sculpture of an anchor seems to be sinking into the gallery's concrete floor, because its shank and arms are actually composed of three separate pieces. The video "About, Souffle" shown not as a projection but on nine individual monitors stacked in a grid, the images likewise chopped up.

"Four Seasons of Loneliness" is also a grid, this time composed from six rows of 10 snapshots. The top and bottom rows show seasonal landscapes. The four rows in between show the artist posed in the landscape, where he acts out alphabet letters that spell out the work's title. (The exception is "four", which turns up as a numeral on the shirt he's wearing.) Not unlike John Baldassari's classic map of California, which spells out the states name with materials gathered from the landscape, Kunath acts as a kind of human semaphore, signaling in vain to an anticipated viewer.

It's a wonderfully odd work. You don't immediately decipher the language

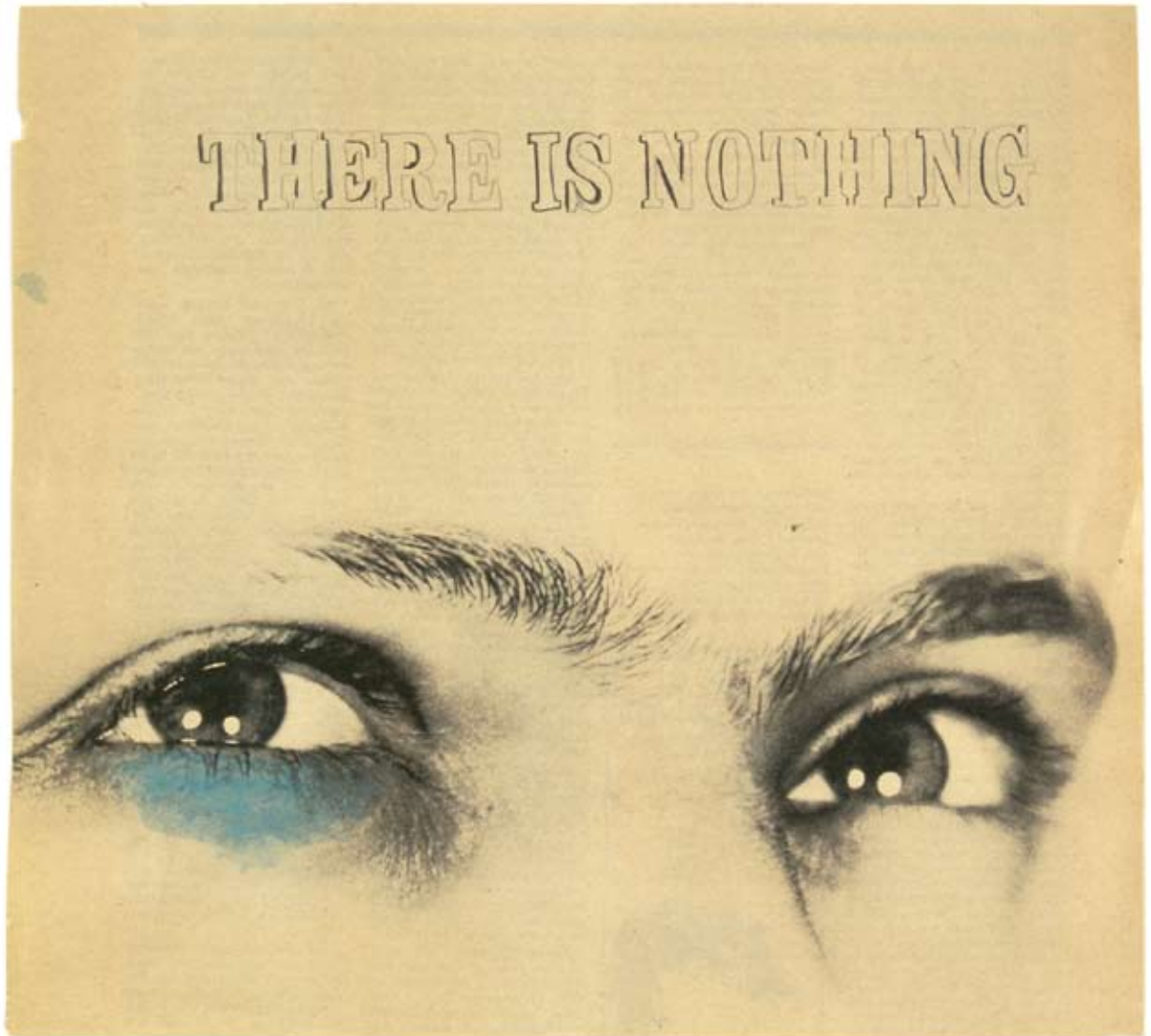
being acted out but when you do, the funny little man in the pictures seems only more remote. Loneliness, the passage of time and a yearning to connect are what register.

The strongest work in the show is "About Souffle," a nearly 33-minute video exploration of the conflict between freedom and Isolation, alienation and escape. To the agitated sound of urgent violins, Kunath repeatedly runs from right to left across the visual field. At regular intervals he makes a little leap - and the scenery changes. as if he's jumped from one locale into another; Urban, suburban, rural, tropical, populated, desolate the scenes range far and wide.

These edits - literal jump cuts - don't always match Kunath's awkward, leaps: The disjunction only adds to the sense of jumpy nervousness in his perpetual flight. A Contemporary variation on a traditional theme --Where do we, come from? Where are we going-- .this acutely observed portrait of manic desperation veers between comic and tragic, setting, just the right tone.

Blum & Poe, 2754 S.La Cienega Blvd, (310) 836-2062, through May 1: Closed Sunday and Mondays.

frieze



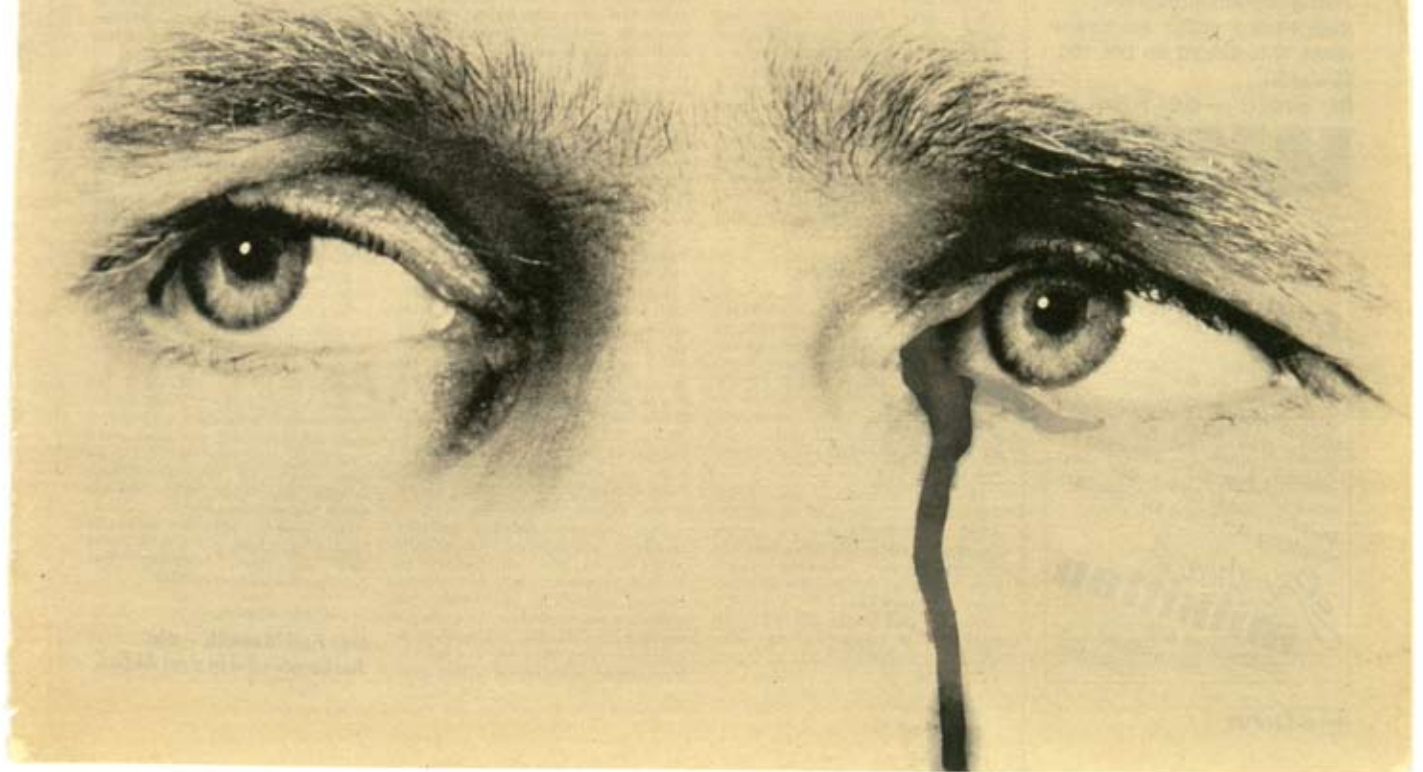
Dan Fox
on Friedrich Kunath

A song in my heart

This article was written to
the accompaniment of
the following records:

- 'Last Night I Dreamt that Somebody Loved Me' - The Smiths (1987)
- 'Hymne à l'Amour' - Edith Piaf (1950)
- 'Don't Pull Your Love' - Glen Campbell (1965)
- 'I'd Love Just Once to See You' - The Beach Boys (1968)
- 'I Love Perth' - Pavement (1996)
- 'Love in a Void' - Siouxsie and the Banshees (1979)
- 'Some Kinda Love' - The Velvet Underground (1969)
- 'Love Will Tear Us Apart' - Joy Division (1980)
- 'You've Lost that Loving Feeling' - Dionne Warwick (1969)
- 'The Look of Love' - Dusty Springfield (1967)
- 'Ever Fallen in Love' - Buzzcocks (1978)
- 'This Is Not a Love Song' - PIL (1983)
- 'I Was Made to Love Magic' - Nick Drake (1967)
- 'Doesn't Love Mean More?' - Jimmy Scott (1990)
- 'There's Nothing Wrong with Love' - Built to Spill (1994)
- 'I'm Gonna Love the Hell Out of You' - Silver Jews (2001)
- 'Careless Love' - Will Oldham (2001)
- 'I'll Be Your Man' - Love (1967)
- 'Hurt' - Johnny Cash (2003)

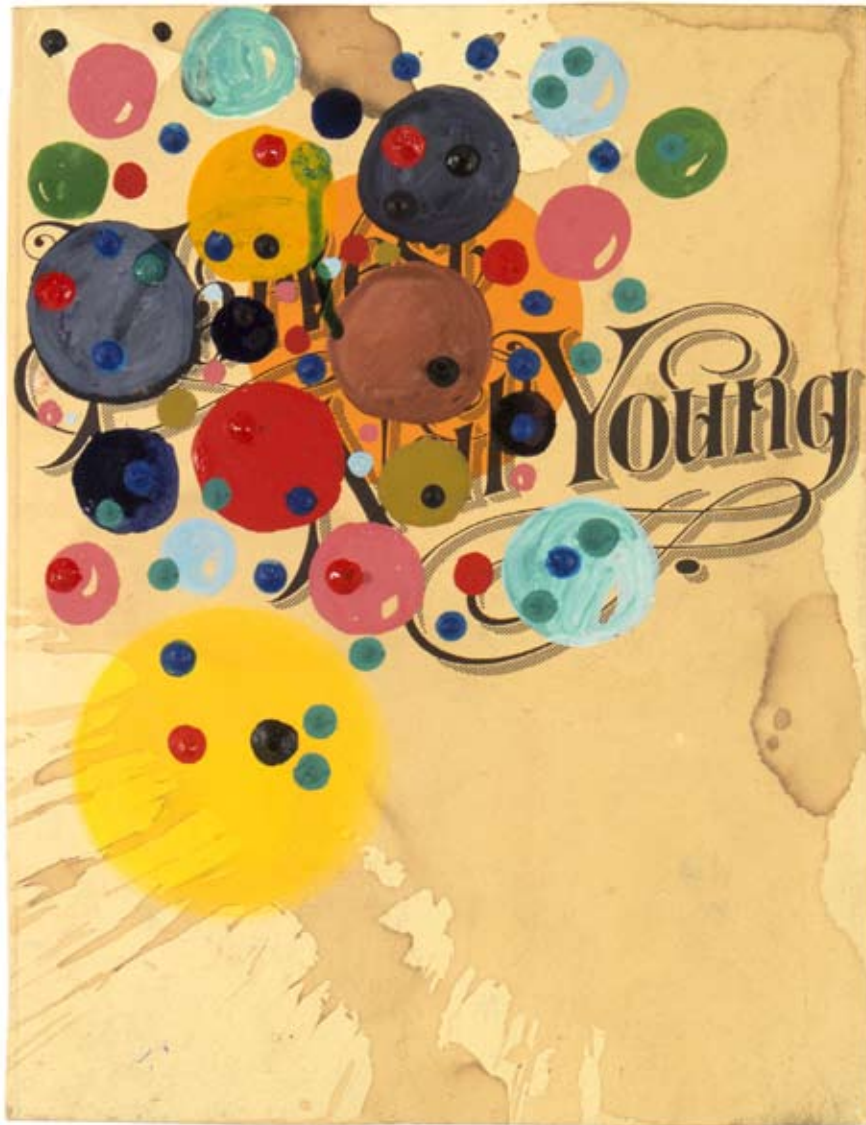
WRONG WITH LOVE



Last night I dreamt that somebody loved me. This statement of autobiographical fact also happens to be the title of The Smiths' last single, released during their acrimonious split in 1987 - a maudlin cry for an end to loneliness like the mournful one-eyed giant gazing longingly at the sleeping nymph in Odilon Redon's painting *The Cyclops* (1898-1900), the song speaks of unrequited desire. Redon's dreamy vision is scumbled and hazy as if unable to focus or put a finger on just what the poor beast feels. The song's generalisms and sense of resignation - 'the story is old, I bow, but it goes on' - are just as vague. Both hint at the desire for an ideal rather than a specific individual. It's about knowing that you need something, but not knowing exactly what form that something might take. A soundtrack of love, hope, isolation and despair.

Ninety-nine percent of all pop songs are about love and, perhaps, so too is most art - in as much as it deals with our individual relationships to each other and to the world. No matter how deep the terms of discussion are couched in abstract philosophies or socio-political histories, a lot boils down to economies of exchange: the fundamentals of how we see each other, how our bodies co-exist with one another and the objects around us. Whether it's a lover you're seeking or God, what's engaging you is essentially the impulse to define the ineffable. In recognizing the need for something to fill the gaps left by an absence of religion or of adequate scientific explanation, we cry out for a phenomenological alleviation of loneliness. As Glen Campbell sang in 'Wichita lineman' (1968): 'I need you more than want you, and I want you for all time.'

Culture is a lonely hearts club band of poetry and song. Through a kind of conditioned empathy I can relate my specific experiences to a film or piece of music just as easily as you can relate to precisely the same film or piece of music with your own emotional knowledge. The artist Friedrich Kunath might call this 'togetherness'. It's a word that crops up from time to time in the drawings, prints and videos he



Kunath's images ache with the sweet pain of melancholy. Lines about longing and failed relationships are flung out in a barrage of heart-breaking pathos,



makes. It could be referring to the melancholic thread that binds his works, Perhaps it's a balanced state of mind - about being a 'together' kind of person. Most likely, it refers to an ideal - a eudemonic, balanced relationship and sense of belonging . Kunath creates an architecture of pathos that is traced, defined and deployed through reference to the shared vernacular short hand of popular culture. Often taking the form of a song or book title juxtaposed with opposite found images referring to languages of love and failure, the mechanisms in his work are reformed from chains of association and the common experience implied therein . Like discovering a shared passion for something with a new acquaintance, the recognition of an appropriated drawing or song title immediately creates a binding effect between you and the object. Just as my dream last night seems best described by way of an 1980s pop song, so Kunath suggests a form of communication that could be formed entirely from names or titles. His images ache with the sweet pain of melancholy. Lines about longing and failed relationships are flung out in such a barrage of heart-breaking pathos as almost to strip emotion from its own linguistic vehicle. As James Surowiecki wrote in an article on the band Pavement: 'When someone sings "I love you" the lan-

guage is public -- who hasn't said "I love you" -- but the emotions are utterly private. (Actually, love songs raise the worrisome possibility that even our deepest emotions are painfully common.)'

This raises curious questions about art and sentimentality, and the extent to which we imbue objects with our own subjective qualities. In as much as art is communication through lifeless materials arranged into a form we tacitly agree is something called language, essentially you're just talking to yourself. Is there not a certain degree of anthropomorphism is the extent to which we ascribe so much value to our favourite books, films or pieces of music ?

In a sense Kunath touches on that hope we invest in materiality. In one untitled work he subtly alters William Blake's cartoon *I H'ant I I Want / (1793)* - an allegory of optimism

TOGETHERNESS

tic (or futile) ambition in which a figure attempts to hook the moon from the sky adding an extra crescent to the moon and thereby transforming the lunar object of desire into the Chanel logo. Clothes, we hope, will transform us, just as we also hope books, records, houses, cars, hi-fi systems, designer furniture, TVs, videos, mobile phones, watches, jewellery, computers, kitchen appliances, smart restaurants, digital cameras, package holidays and organic bread will all make us better people. We're just chasing phantasmagorias of happiness. Kunath recognizes the pathetic heroism of the failed gesture. The llyer for his statement at Art Basel earlier this year sports a collage of a crystal chandelier hung from an unseen point in the sky, as if in competition with the explosive sunset on the horizon behind it. In another sepia-toned photographic piece the smooth contours of an empty beach are interrupted with the word 'Motherfucker' traced into the damp sand. Both images are tragicomic in as much as they speak of the inability of

humans to articulate their innermost sense of beauty or angry frustration. Just as the words you're reading now will never sufficiently convey every nuance of every reason why I or any of the other writers in the magazine you're holding, do or do not find their subject interesting. A thin permafrost of solipsism will always prevent that. But failure can only be understood in terms of ambition, and therein lies its value. Last night I dreamt that somebody loved me, and this morning, as I sat down to write, Johnny Cash died. Not that there's any concrete causal connection between the two events, of course. Rather, both crackled and sparked as they bounced, like Kunath's work, across the cultural matrix that connects you and me through song and sentiment - a feeling as light as the pop song that your radio alarm clock woke you up to this morning, and as heavy as the loneliness that descended immediately after.

OCTOBER 2002

FRIEDRICH KUNATH

BQ

“Welcome Home Steve Curry” was the title under which Friedrich Kunath, born in 1974, opened the new gallery BQ in Cologne’s Belgian Quarter, which has again become more important in recent years as new spaces have appeared. Drawings, a small sculpture, and recent videos, several of which were created specifically for this exhibition, centered on the theme of failure. The word itself was put into play—almost as a motto for the show in a large work (Untitled, 2002) made of black carbon paper bearing a quotation written in chalk in which Thomas Edison declares that none of his inventions were failures, but that among them were ten thousand possibilities that didn’t happen to work. Accordingly, the joys of such so-called mistakes and playful experimentation were apparent in the works exhibited here. A typical example was a small sculpture lying on the floor, apparently a godchild of the Dutch Conceptualist Bas Jan Ader. Kunath’s sculpture keeps to primary colors, while the materials used—red velvet fabric, yellow-painted sandpaper, blue-painted wood—casually depart from any claim to “purity.” The text, which reads WHAT HAPPENS WHEN YOU TRY TO FAIL AND THEN SUCCEED, puts an additional ironic twist on failure, a central theme for Ader as well, who represented it as falling, not quite the opposite of success.

This pleasure in falling and in highly awkward situations that make random passersby into unwitting accomplices characterized Kunath’s earlier videos *After a While You Know the Style*, 2000, and *I Am Not Patrick Swayze*, 2001. In *After a While*, we see Kunath strutting around the streets of Hamburg and falling down quite a bit along the way. The passersby, who react either indignantly

or with horrified concern, can’t be sure whether these stumbles are accidental or are meant to provoke them. This mixture of apparent coincidence and obvious theatricality is transposed into a provocative stance in *I Am Not Patrick Swayze*. This video shows Kunath attempting several times to climb a tree, then suddenly falling down in front of a pedestrian and either remaining there or lying down in a flower bed. *I Am Not Patrick Swayze*, like *After a While* and his most recent video, *When Was the First Time You Realized the Next Time Would Be the Last Time*, 2002, appropriates the form of the music video and combines it with elements of slapstick, entertainment formats like the candid camera, and moments of filmic collage, such as in the new video when he focuses on the eternally idyllic details of the Melaten cemetery in Cologne. While in his early videos Kunath was acting out and thus putting himself in potentially uncontrollable situations, in *When Was the first Time* he provokes the passersby from a safe distance—which renders the new video, despite its greater formal resolution, rather one-dimensional.

The ambiguity of Kunath’s approach, with its equally ludic and casually melancholy little pranks, becomes most pointed in his drawings, the medium he has pursued most consistently. Thus a loosely rendered watercolor drawing from 2002 of two profiles is subtitled *Most People Deserve Each Other*; and on an otherwise empty page he makes the lapidary note: WHEN SOMETHING NEEDS TO BE PAINTED IT LETS ME KNOW.

—Astrid Wege

ARTFORUM



Friedrich Kunath, Untitled, 2002, Wood, acrylic, fabric, and emery paper. 25 1/4 x 6 x 3 “

"Zero Gravity", Kunstverein Dusseldorf, 2001

FRIEDRICH KUNATH

by Gregor Jansen

What can be saved of the genius is instrumental for the purpose

(Adorno, A.T.)

"God is whoever you are performing for"

The artist Friedrich Kunath stands within and understands the world of disenchanted things. He is a homeless searcher who polemically intervenes in subjective reason, who is satisfied with the simplicity existence and who constantly searches and finds himself through the desired negation. Addressing contradiction and the things that do not simply want to remain the Plgs among things determine his drive. The crude implication of social and private failure is always intended; there is no hope without hopelessness. Crude Kunath.

"I asked a painter why the roads are colored black. He said, "Friedrich, it's because people leave and no highway brings them back".

That is the dialectic relationship in which Friedrich Kunath's art takes place. In the video "After a while you know the style," falling down the social ladder as a part of the plot is both desire and frustration simultaneously. Dire straits are caricatured as the passing and fall of time in the characteristic style of a continuous music video. The leading hero of the story is the artist him-self, who is generally only perceived yet not well treated in the running gag, and who is marked by weakness (as a crime) to the point of being a tragedy.

The pragmatically narrow rationality demands childish forms in expressing far-sightedness. Kunath's childish maturity is filled with the warmth and an expressiveness that professes allusions to the game of socially productive forces by allowing the subjective part of his person shine through. Yet the quality herein is the objectification of the subjective appearance - a distance towards things, even though Kunath formu-

lates his freedom in the middle of it all, or even more so, by being born through being. A painful freedom in which beauty is sacrificed to friendly grave diggers, romance is dedicated to sleeping poets and the humor of the good Lord praises glory. something centrifugally circling seems to be discernable in his works. Their lives feed on death, oversteps bourgeois morals and posits purposiveness as stemming from the world, as constitutive and pre-existent.

The wild Kindness - no home, no food, no sex"

"Left me standing in the rain", Husker OCt - The truth in life has disappeared. Kunath knows this but does not want to. His experience, his treasure, his truth has submerged into the warm waves of purposive meaning and its translation in the medium. In the age of cyan and magenta, Friedrich Kunath stands in silver and gold in the public area of Hamburg and Bangkok as a "player" among involuntary comrades. He exposes his being and uses the negativity of the role to play through the loss of meaning with irony as purposiveness without purpose. This is pleasing, above all, because Kunath does not mean beautiful (as Kant formulated purposiveness without purpose), but because purposive beauty as a blank space presents itself to him in the centrifugal system of three points: Mi Vida Loca. It is space in his life. He waves us to come forth yet winks his eyes! Is the sun blinding him?

(Translation Rosanne Altstadt)