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Woodward, Daisy: *as many questions as answers with André Butzer*

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as many questions as answers with andré butzer

As he turns 50, *DAISY WOODWARD* interviews the ICONOCLASTIC German artist — and finds his APPROACH to the interview is as COLOURFUL as his paintings

Recognising an André Butzer is not an easy task for the untrained eye. As one of Germany's most sought-after contemporary artists — his works selling for record prices at auction and populating the permanent collections of some of the world's most revered museums, including London's Saatchi Gallery and the Art Institute of Chicago — that isn't to the artist's disadvantage. And yet, for those familiar with the Berlin-based artist's universe — and it is undoubtedly a universe that he has created — all parts come together as an extra-

dinary whole, rooted in the exploration of paint's possibilities and the contemplation of humanity's many contradictions.

Butzer was born in Stuttgart in 1973. His mother was a hairdresser, his father an employee of the multinational technology corporation IBM. It was only at the age of 20 that he began to paint, inspired by an encounter with Asger Jorn's 1960 painting *The Green Ballet* at the Hamburg Kunsthalle. A non-conformist by nature, Butzer was expelled from art school after just two semesters, and

went on to co-found the Hamburg-based artists' collective Akademie Isotrop — a self-professed "antipode to the revolting situation at the existing seats of learning" — in 1996. The academy hosted seminars and exhibitions and published members' writings up until 2000, the same year Butzer relocated to Berlin and kick-started his solo career.

Though today his work spans multiple forms of expression — from the figurative to the abstract, the colourful to the sombre, the chaotic to the controlled — Butzer's early paint-

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I am STILLTRYING to find it"— André Butzer

ings are recognisable by their cartoonish aliens rendered in gestural strokes and garish, German expressionist hues. "I really overdid what I thought an extra-terrestrial expressionist painting might be," Butzer said of these formative, thickly-im-pastoed works in a 2017 interview. "But I also integrated all kinds of other topics, motives, titles, references to art history (and) brand names." Indeed, the works brim with allusions to history, politics, and culture – particularly in relation to Germany and the US. As the publisher Hans Werner Holzwarth writes in his introduction to Taschen's 2021 monograph, *André Butzer*: "Butzer's work draws from scenes of a friendly occupation, the human condition in West Germany under US cultural protectorate. The new gods have brought Mickey Mouse, Coca-Cola, potato chips, Star Wars. They also bring the promise of death by atom or blood sugar." Simultaneously enticing and sickly, and titled things like *1 Eis, Bitte!* ("One Ice-Cream, Please!") or *Kill For Satan*, this duality is always present in a Butzer piece.

In the early 2000s, working in a style he dubbed "science-fiction expressionism", Butzer began fleshing out his fictional cosmos, citing influences as diverse as Friedrich Hölderlin and Edvard Munch to Walt Disney and Henry Ford. He conceived ANNAHEIM, the self-termed "capital of German California" and

NASAHEIM, "its partner colony out in space" — places he has reimagined again and again. These realms are occupied by a cast of recurring characters, including Friedens-Siemens ("Peace-Siemens"), a friendly-faced being who exists at the intersection of utopian ideals and mass consumerism; the Woman, a kindly figure embodying birth, death and benevolence; and, following a stint spent in LA, The Wanderer, a displaced soul identifiable by his tentacled skull, who may or may not represent Butzer himself.

"I saw them coming out of the paint," Butzer explained of his signature figures' first appearances in his work, speaking with Guillermo Solana, artistic director of the Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza in Madrid, for the catalogue of the museum's current retrospective of his work. "When I was young, I was sure I had seen Donald Duck in an (Asgen) Jorg painting. It convinced me it should be possible to consider conspiring with the paint and let these things show up by themselves, out of the paint. This brought me to the place where I could start serving the spirits and rhythms of creation."

It was maybe this mode of thinking that led Butzer to begin experimenting with abstraction in 2004, when he created the first of his so-called *Haselnuss* paintings: wonderfully rich, large-scale studies in grey, rendered with scratches, dashes and





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thick paint blobs. By 2010, he had arrived at his acclaimed *N-Bilder* series ("N-Paintings"): vast, fully abstracted works in black and white, in which the artist intricately explores what the Taschen monograph describes as "the fundamental dimensions and potential of painterly expression at the extreme limits of visibility." These increasingly dark works would occupy him for much of the decade that followed, until a move to California in 2018 set Butzer in a brighter direction.

Butzer's latest works see him more playful than ever. Alongside the Madrid retrospective and a show at Salon Dahlmann, Berlin, a new exhibition at the Kebbel Villa | Oberpfälzer Künstlerhaus in Schwandorf sees the artist "completely renounce the inclusion of the walls as a hanging surface for his pictures, as well as the pictures themselves." That's right: it's an exhibition without any artworks at all, only a large copper N at the display's entrance that simply bears the word, *rebirth* – something that Butzer, who just celebrated his 50th birthday, is particularly good at.

WAS ANYONE IN YOUR FAMILY CREATIVE, OR WERE YOU AN "ANOMALY"? DID YOU ALWAYS KNOW YOU WANTED TO BE AN ARTIST?

I came from a long line of shipbuilders, wine makers, street cleaners and butchers. We came from up on the sun, out of a mirage. We were boiling huevos and seeing monsters everywhere. It was about forbidden places. We were too high to die. No joke.

From there on, we have been rising to our knees.

DO YOU EVER REFERENCE YOUR CHILDHOOD IN YOUR WORK?

I don't know anything about my childhood. I am still trying to find it. I am a very lonely old man now with funny paintings. I don't know who I am. I have no heart.

INSTEAD OF ATTENDING A REGULAR ART SCHOOL, YOU CO-FOUNDED AKADEMIE ISOTROP WITH FELLOW-MINDED ARTISTS. WHAT WAS THE MOST FORMATIVE MOMENT YOU HAD AS A SELF-TAUGHT STUDENT?

I forgot most [things] about it in the meantime. It was too much for me. People were very involved in it. I didn't fit in. And I was kicked out. Or was this from the other school? I hate schools but I love the students.

CAN YOU EXPAND A LITTLE ON YOUR PERSONAL FORM OF EXPRESSIONISM?

All I can say is for now, there is no personal form of expressing yourself. It doesn't exist. Expression is either universal and very common and everywhere, or nowhere. Art is not helpful at all. People misuse art for what they think is helpful.

"NASAHEIM" – THE PLACE AND TERM – HOLDS MUCH VALUE FOR YOU AND YOUR WORK. IT HAS BEEN DESCRIBED AS "AN EVER-UNATTAINABLE MEASURE TO ASPIRE TO". IS THAT HOW YOU WOULD EXPLAIN IT?

It's only a measurement. It's not measurable at all, though. You can't measure it. I can't measure it. You can't measure it. It's not an idea. It's nothing you can apply to any-

thing. But it's not about nothing, it's about the opposite of nothing. What is the opposite of nothing? It's nowhere, but it's located. There is a location for it. It has no size but it's about seeing.

WHERE DID YOUR FASCINATION WITH POP CULTURE COME FROM?

I am less and less fascinated with anything that is or seems "Pop". I have to say, I am starting to be very bored by it and I am working very effectively against it, but I do this as peacefully as possible. I am the owner of 500 Cézanne catalogues. He is the best. He is the biggest threat to everyone. His brushstrokes are threatening us. He has destroyed stupid Pop, even before it was invented! Pop is a lie. It's a trap.

YOU OFTEN SAY THAT ALL OF YOUR WORK IS ABSTRACT. DO YOU THINK THE SEPARATION BETWEEN ABSTRACT AND FIGURATIVE PAINTING WAS EVER FRUITFUL?

No. There is no "abstract." Whatever it is and whatever people call it, it's all bullshit and it's boring. It's part of the ongoing campaign against truth. These are fake conflicts. There are fake conflicts nowadays everywhere.

I'D LOVE TO HEAR MORE ABOUT THE DEVELOPMENT AND CREATION OF YOUR GREY PAINTINGS, AND THE "N-PAINTINGS" THEREAFTER...

I was on the way to finding the origin of painting. There's a path. It's not a road. No traffic through. No noisy highway. Where I can walk. Between the trees. A strip of green. It's rolling my way. And the moon shines down. The moon shines down. »

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YOU'VE LIVED IN STUTTGART, HAMBURG, BERLIN, CALIFORNIA, AMONG OTHER PLACES. DOES WHERE YOU LIVE IMPACT YOUR ART?

I am dead, I don't live. Wherever I am, there's wind in the trees and I am observing it. This is what has remained of myself.

YOU ONCE SAID THAT PAINTING IS ABOUT PROPORTION AND MEASUREMENT ONLY. IT STRIKES ME THAT LIGHT AND COLOUR ARE ALSO VERY IMPORTANT TO YOU. ARE THOSE CONSTANTS IN YOUR WORK?

Yes, absolutely, it's true. This is what it's about. Because they're the same thing, always and forever returning. Yes, you are right. Blue especially. Only in conjunction with red and yellow, I think. It's crazy. I can't paint. I have no idea. I am alone.

HOW DO YOU START A PAINTING? ARE THERE ANY RITUALS?

I always paint – and never do I paint. I have no time. There is no time. It never ends. I am the beginner. I will start all over again. I will not know anything. I am a definition of dumb and lazy. I am sleeping all day. I am at home. I love my home. This is where I sleep.

WHEN OR WHERE DO YOU WORK BEST?

At home. During the day or during the evening. Not too late, though. I would be too tired. And this is the time, I have to go up way upstairs to another level and wash my leftover face and brush my own teeth and read in a book that I don't really understand, although I have written it myself and for myself. I am the only reader of the book. My book is world literature. I read one page out of it every night, until the shadows greet the morning light.

WHAT DO YOU ENJOY MOST ABOUT PAINTING?

Nothing. I try to not paint, but I can't. WHAT DO YOU ENJOY LEAST?

Governments and the global organisations behind them.

WHAT ARE YOUR GREATEST SOURCES OF INSPIRATION? ARE THERE OTHER ARTISTS YOU FEEL MOST INSPIRED BY?

Matisse, Matisse and Matisse. I like them all. I don't like Tintoretto. They're all good. I don't like Goya. They're all good. I don't like Caravaggio. They're all good. I don't like Manet. They're all good. Mondrian is a winemaker. He is working in a vineyard. He is not a constructivist. He is a great expressionist. Constructivism is stupid. It takes a long time for many people in the art industry to understand this. The art industry is stupid. There is no art in the USA. They're all dead. OK, some are alive but not in the art industry!

IS THERE ANYTHING ABOUT YOU THAT SURPRISES PEOPLE?

They think I am somebody else.

AT THE MOMENT, YOUR WORK IS THE FOCUS OF THREE INSTITUTIONAL EXHIBITIONS: IN BERLIN, SCHWANDORF AND MADRID. CAN YOU TELL ME A LITTLE ABOUT THE SHOWS? ARE THEY RELATED OR IS EACH A SEPARATE ENTITY OF ITS OWN?

They're all the same shows but they look slightly different. I was proud to show no paintings in Schwandorf, I love Schwandorf therefore they let me do this. I love Madrid. I am very famous with the paintings now all over Madrid and almost in all of Spain. People love the paintings in Asia, too. Mostly people who have never seen the paintings before, they love the paintings. Also Timo, who runs Salon Dahlmann, is a fine friend. He is very brave. He gave me a show in Berlin.

ANY PLANS FOR THE FUTURE?

Over the next decades, I want to prepare myself for my death. There will be an endless number of decades. I will return in a different body and bring joy, again and again. It's all about the joy! ●

P.55 ANDRÉ BUTZER, UNTITLED, 2022, ACRYLIC ON CANVAS, 102 x 50 CM
P.58 ANDRÉ BUTZER, MAIKÄFER FLIEG! (3), 2022, ACRYLIC ON CANVAS, 239 x 191 CM
P.61 ANDRÉ BUTZER, UNTITLED, 2022, ACRYLIC ON CANVAS, 200 x 192 CM
COURTESY GALERIE CHRISTINE MAYER

