

**Artforum**

Herbert, Martin: *Friedrich Kunath*

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# ARTFORUM



View of "Friedrich Kunath," 2015. Foreground: *B.C. (Fraktur)*, 2015. Background: *You Know We Can't Go Back*, 2015. Photo: Roman Maerz.

## Friedrich Kunath

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In Friedrich Kunath's painting *It's Friedrich* (all works cited, 2015), the handwritten title phrase emerges from an old-fashioned, corkscrew-cord telephone held out by an anthropomorphic cartoon tree. The latter—a black-lined overlay, like David Salle for tots—sits on a landscape that runs Romanticism through an Athena-poster filter: above, an empurpled sky full of clouds that themselves resemble craggy mountains; below, aquamarine river water hammering rocks, upon which the tree—smiling—stands. By this point, several suavely vulgarized landscapes into the German-born, Los Angeles-based Kunath's exhibition "Sentimental Air," it takes the viewer a moment to register that the Friedrich referred to might be the present-day artist himself, and not (or not only) Caspar David. Indeed, the work can appear emphatically driven by the problem of nostalgia, by theatrical longing not only for real sublimity but even for a poster-shop debasement of same.

Two decades into his career, Kunath's work risks inviting a symbolism-laden, downbeat read when aligned with his biography: that of a German landscape painter, at the fag end of a noble artistic tradition, marooned amid the superficialities and polluted sunsets of SoCal, a one-man microcosm of civilization's decline. Paintings such as *I'm OK by Myself*, whose solitary black cat serves as auxiliary *Rückenfigur* while gazing, from a high point, over a tacky pink-and-blue cloud canopy at twilight—the title phrase is spelled out there in puffy cumuli—can seem to expend themselves in real time, their cheap satisfactions structurally analogous to the shallow contemporary reality Kunath outwardly evokes. But to apply this interpretative approach is to succumb to the pitfall of impatience, stuffing the artist into a box in which he doesn't quite fit; one misses the sincerity, even circumspect hopefulness, cached in the work.

In *Cloudy (Island)*, one of six paintings on cute, overlapping, cutout Styrofoam cloud shapes, the artist has sketched a bedraggled couple on a humpy atoll, beneath a palm's shade, an ocean liner passing behind them. The sketch, floating over the background of a smooth, airbrushed seascape, resembles a prompt for a *New Yorker* caption competition. But what's curious is that the couple, entranced by the blank sea, seems to not even notice the boat. In the present, they're also above it; such pockets of *something* feasibly numinous in the now glimmer across Kunath's work. Time-travel is not an option: *You Know We Can't Go Back* is the title of another painting—featuring a pair of heavy, pseudo-eighteenth-century sunset or sunrise landscapes, one on each end, and rotating hypnotically on the wall in the gallery's white-carpeted upstairs space, while ominous music by the 1970s German art-rock band Popol Vuh surges from an iPod dock. The sculpture *Let It Happen*, meanwhile, features a giant sculpted meerkat trying to sleep on orange-foam-rubber earplugs, the neon outline of a crescent moon beside it.

Nostalgia, Kunath avers, is easy. What's harder is finding some kind of grandeur in a present that always compares badly with the patinated past. The works in "Sentimental Air" don't try to show feelings of transitory elevation, knowing they can't, and there's a seeming reason—even if it's the weakest work—why Kunath has scattered the upstairs space with big, doodled-on sculptures of pointing fingers aimed at nothing visible. In terms of actual content, the resulting works are doughnut-shaped, but generously so: In gesturing toward someone else having their heightened instant, or stumbling toward the instant itself, or setting up the conditions for it—like the man with his head in an evanescent blue gap in billowing auburn clouds in the sketch-on-landscape of *Cloudy (Ladder Man)*—they advance something similar for all of us, even amid the flotsam and reflex retrospection of this world.

—Martin Herbert