

**SSENSE**

Feldhaus, Timo: Interview

15 November 2016

## SSENSE

# FRIEDRICH KUNATH'S ELEGANT FAILURES

“In My World Everything Is a Projection”

Interview: Timo Feldhaus  
Photography: Christian Werner



It is on one of those timeless L.A. late afternoons that we visit the artist Friedrich Kunath in his studio—timeless because the sun set just as gloriously on this day as on each of the 364 other days of the year in this city.

Some beautiful cars are parked in front of a big garage; a couple of them are the artist's. In his roomy studio he has spread out his personal wunderkammer of pop-cultural artifacts across several tables, a selection of objects that mean a lot to him. In the middle of it all is a drum kit. On the walls are finished and almost-finished canvases. Born in 1974 in a small town in what was then East Germany, Kunath has made it big in L.A. With melancholy humor, his works hold a delicate balance over the chasms of everyday life.

On the day of our visit, there's a warmth and softness in his eyes as he blinks. He is wearing a baseball cap. The painter has recently started getting more into perfume.



Timo Feldhaus  
Friedrich Kunath

**Why do shoes of various kinds come up in your paintings so often? I've spotted a whole panoply of sneakers, slippers, and loafers in your work.**

Age-old, banal symbols of abandonment simply have a fetish effect on me. That's also why there are always, for example, suitcases in my paintings. I'm just stuck with all that, and at some point I realized that it doesn't have to be a problem. It's ok.

**What does leaving someone or being left behind have to do with shoes?**

You're always leaving, right, and the chances are that you forget something. But you carry on leaving, onward and onward, away. That's why the shoes are often disproportionately large.

**You left Germany in 2007, heading for California. Is there a connection between Chemnitz, the small East German town where you were born, and L.A.?**

It likely has something to do with projection: the romantic pull of the West. I've always carried it with me, also in the town where I was born, which is known mostly for its low standard of living and high suicide rate. The first time I was in California I was astounded at the scale, the grandeur, the horizon. And the quality of the light. You suddenly notice: there's so much contrast here—contrast, in the literal sense.



Karl Lagerfeld once said that a good idea doesn't just show up when you're lying at the beach, you have to work hard for it. That makes sense in view of his work ethic, doesn't it?

**You're meant to say he's wrong...**

Of course I've made a lot of my works at the beach. But I know what he means. Lagerfeld is his own capitalist. He thinks self-exploitation is great, so he exaggerates it and makes a spectacle of it in his own persona. He is anti-romantic, anti-nostalgic, because that's exactly what makes him original within the system of fashion



In your work you continually play a balancing act with feelings of nostalgia. There's always a little melancholy, but at the same time you open trapdoors, and make it possible to laugh on the inside.

Nostalgia can be very dangerous. I'm living in 2016 after all. And I don't at all want to go back, but forward. In the end nostalgia means memory without the pain, and once you've realized that, there's an amazing technique for dealing with it: irony.

**What's your modus operandi? How do you go about making your work?**

My painting functions like a diary. At 10 in the morning I come to the studio—well, what else am I supposed to do?

**Then you sit down here?**

No, I don't really sit much. I switch on lights and music. Three quarters of the time I'm leafing through books. I have my tables here, as you saw. I arrange various pictures on them.

**These records, books, magazine clippings are a wunderkammer of your own socialization into pop culture, right?**

It's a psychedelic archive. It is a compendium of the things that I was—or still am—totally enthusiastic about. It likely has something to do with immortality, this investigation of eternal youth. Historically, after all, L.A. is the ultimate city for self-invention.



**How precisely do you work that into your painting?**

For years I haven't really done anything but pushing things to and fro. It's a kind of collage process. When I'm happy with something I haul the collage onto the photocopier and make a kind of layered copy out of maybe eight different sources. For example, a painting by Carl Spitzweg, an ad for Lanvin perfume, and a postcard someone sent me. Then there's sometimes a canvas that I've marinated, two days earlier, with watercolors. It could for example have a waterfall or a sunset on it.

**You have a screensaver painted onto the canvas? Why does there need to be something already on it?**

I can't paint on an empty canvas. I'm just as allergic to that as I am to going on a journey into myself to find something to paint. And then I begin, maybe in the Hollywood tradition, to project things onto it. Later my assistants fill out the details. I say to them: "Can you make that green, red, blue?" Though mostly I leave things like that to them, too, because to me it really doesn't matter. The big question is: How, in 2016, do you make a composition? Is it important to paint yourself? I think sometimes it is and sometimes it isn't. You have to leave it open. I paint over a projection. Everything is a projection, at least for me, here and now.



**It is all traced, copied?**

That's right. I never have an idea of my own. So at some point it becomes my idea, of course. It's exactly because it is so much about me and so loaded with Romantic references that I have to be careful not to fall into the trap of also having to paint it myself. Eventually it became clear to me that my path to find myself takes me through that which is already there. Where do I stand within the entire violated image-world that is at our fingertips?

**Words also play an important role, don't they?**

I read and write a lot. One-liners or lyrics for songs. When I'm making collages I have sentences and words in my head that give rise to a kind of unbridled narration. I am not a pro. I see myself more in the role of a songwriter, standing behind the assistant. And this distance is crucial: writing, selecting, adding and taking away.

**Like a director, in fact.**

The painter's problem is that sometimes you spend hours on a single thing and even when you've failed at it, you have massive problems killing it off because you have invested so much time and work in it. And yet, destroying things you've made is a really essential part of the process.





**Could you say what things you keep coming back to?**

I love how I can endow things that are around me with fetishistic characteristics. If you play a lot of tennis, as I do, you automatically begin thinking about tennis.

**The solitude of the player on the court?**

The ball always comes back, right? There's a work of mine for which I wrote "The Past" on the wall and played tennis against it. An endless Rorschach, an endless loop, a *conditio humana*. You get another go, again and again, but what you want and in the final analysis all you can do is to keep the ball in the game. Of course that's not why I play tennis. But when you're an artist, you inevitably start thinking about such a banal thing as a tennis ball in ways that let it explain the meaning of your life. Ultimately, you can do that with everything.



**What else inspires you?**

Probably music most of all. Music is like breathing. I do it every day and every night. Buying, archiving, listening, talking, and reading about it. It's more than sounds in a room. What does it do to me? Maybe I am a musician manqué. Maybe I am playing guitar with the paintbrush.

**Your works often stage an ironic, elaborate form of failure. It's hard to say if it's tragedy or comedy.**

You could perhaps say that I give failure a certain elegance. If you take away the horror, then failure is wearing a suit. The literary critic Marcel Reich-Ranicki once said it's better to cry in a taxi than in a tram.

**Because it looks better?**

Most important is that it feels better.



**You've also taken an interest in perfumes for some time.**

I've always collected perfumes. It started by accident, just out of curiosity. But at some point I realized that smells are actually invisible sculptures. I make videos, photos, objects, and paintings, and suddenly I seemed to have another building block that can, amazingly, not be represented or grasped visually. But maybe a particular yearning or irony can also manifest as an invisible sculpture. I met a perfumer and asked them: What does arrogance smell like? We had exciting conversations. It wasn't so different from being in the studio. And in the end you flip out because it really works. You take in a smell and something comes into your mind. I find that interesting in my pictures, too. When something touches your feelings it mostly has to do with the reactivation of a memory.



## What do we latch onto when we smell something?

Whatever it was that you smelled in your mom's kitchen or in your grandpa's backyard. Your girlfriend's first perfume. Ninety-nine percent of childhood memories are still triggers for something today. Right now we're working on the question: What does a sunset smell like? Sunsets are actually, in terms of art history, symbols of mourning and pretty negative, with connotations of death. So would they smell morbid, or romantic, sweet, bitter? There are a lot of variations.



## Why is it that smells have such an immediate punch?

Biologically speaking, our sense of smell works without being filtered in any way. When you see something, it passes into your visual cortex and only then is a signal passed on for processing. Taste and hearing are the same: they always go through a processor first. What gets into your nose, however, goes directly—wham!—to your brain. At the moment there's a perfume for sale here in L.A. that smells of a suntan lotion that was very popular in the 60s and 70s. When people who used it or smelled it in those days smell it again today, they are right back to, say, sitting in the back of the car on the way home from Malibu, with a towel blowing in the wind. It's time travel, through the nose.