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Friedrich Kunath's fever dream at Blum & Poe Wild emotion flows through 'Lacan's Haircut,' the painter's massive solo show.

By Jori Finkel | October 14th, 2012

Walking into Friedrich Kunath's show at Blum & Poe is like stumbling into a dream that is at once madcap and melancholy.

The paintings bring together a mishmash of images, whether goofy cartoon animals or brooding men from 19th-century German etchings. On the floor is a trail of giant shoes — replicas of men's penny loafers filled not with feet but with odd objects like a massive matchstick or a big banana.

The deeper you walk into the show, the closer you get to the dreamer-character himself, a painfully lonely man who ultimately appears in two forms: a lumpy sculpture slumped on the floor and a character in a 17-minute film shown adrift on land and at sea. The film is called "You Go Your Way and I'll Go Crazy."

The show feels like one big hallucination of this shipwrecked or exiled man.

"I would say fever dream," said the artist, 38, something of an exile himself, having grown up in East Germany and lived in Berlin and Cologne before landing five years ago in L.A..

"To me hallucination always implies drugs. I think fever dream because there's a little more truth there or the promise of something real."



Anne Cusack/ Los Angeles Times
The work of artist Friedrich Kunath is on display at Blum & Poe in Los Angeles through Oct. 27.

Whatever you call it, the show easily ranks as Kunath's most ambitious. Not only is it two or three times the size of most solo shows (with 32 paintings, 14 sculptures, an installation and a film, all made this year), but many works are large and dizzyingly dense.

"It's a real game-changer," says independent curator Douglas Fogle, who describes an explosion or escalation of themes found in earlier work at Blum & Poe here and the Andrea Rosen gallery in New York. Next: a museum show in Hannover, Germany, this fall and a major touring show in Europe organized by Modern Art Oxford next year.

This summer, while preparing for the L.A. show, Kunath also became a father for the first time. "It pushed me in weird ways," he said during a visit to the gallery. "I was so agitated by all this life."

He was wearing jeans, a black jacket and, yes, loafers. “I love loafers,” he said with a soft German accent. “I don’t like to tie my shoes, and I don’t like to wear socks. They’re a good way to walk through life.”

He also likes their cultural history, talking about their association with New England preppies as a “transatlantic myth,” considering they were really invented in Norway — hence the name Weejuns (for Norwegians).

Looking down at the giant loafer-sculptures, Kunath noticed scuff marks on the lurid yellow carpet covering the concrete gallery floors. “I wanted something on the ugly side, and this was perfect. It reminded me of a kid’s room in Czechoslovakia,” he said.

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The Blum & Poe show, open through Oct. 27, is called “Lacan’s Haircut,” but Kunath says it is not a reference to French psychoanalytic theory. Rather, he liked playing the everyday against the high-minded.

He also brings high and low together within a single painting. He typically begins the process by making a color-field-style painting by pouring, spraying or brushing paint on a thin layer of muslin on the floor “and letting the colors marinate,” he said.

He then tacks the muslin up on the wall to make paintings and drawings based on projected images, putting assistants to work as well. After that, he fleshes out images freehand before the painting is stretched and mounted on heavier canvas.

His work is at root Surrealist collage, though closer in spirit to the overlaid images of Francis Picabia or enigmatic narratives of Max Ernst than the seamless landscapes of Dali or Magritte.

For one canvas he placed a shiny American cowboy boot on the foot of an 18th-century Romantic figure by German painter Julius Schnorr von Carolsfeld. Another brings together a Dutch vanitas skull, a Jiminy Cricket-like character, and an ice cream bar against a psychedelic mountain landscape.

“You have these dots and you want to connect them. I always felt I wanted to have the dots but not connect them,” Kunath said. “Meaning always comes after for me.”

In many paintings, the color-field-style background provides coherence for disjunctive images. In others, the canvas is ruled like notebook paper, with the idea of a notebook — that catch-all for jottings and doodles throughout the day — serving as an organizing motif.

“The illusion of a notebook allows me to put things on canvas that have no connection to each other but in the end make sense, a democracy of sense. The logic of the notepad is a democracy of images,” he said.

“Democracy” is a loaded word for Kunath, born in 1974 in the East German town of Karl-Marx-stadt, which changed its name to Chemnitz after the fall of the Berlin Wall. Or, as the artist says, “I was born in a state that no longer exists.”

He spent his early years in East Berlin with his stepfather, mother and a lot of musicians, who often slept at their house because his mother managed rock bands.

He describes it as a “hippie, ‘60s sort of community — except that some of our close friends and family turned out to be members of the Stasi,” he said. “Did you see the movie ‘The Lives of Others?’” a reference to the 2006 film about daily life under the powerful East German secret police.

When he was a teenager, his family moved to West Berlin and then to the city of Braunschweig. He describes landing in art school despite his lack of focus thanks to his mother: “She took my stuff and applied for me without my knowing it.”

He got in — to the HBK or Braunschweig University of Art. There his interests drifted a bit and he held odd jobs but also discovered artists like Bas Jan Ader, the lyrical and mystical Dutch artist who is believed to have died in the course of one performance: an attempt to sail single-handedly across the Atlantic called “In Search of the Miraculous.”

“He was almost like a musician or James Dean character in his biography,” Kunath said. “But what he really did for me and artists of my generation was find ways to connect conceptual art with a certain emotional approach. How can I conceptually say I love you? How can I analyze it but still have the emotion intact?”

In 1998 Kunath moved to Berlin, where he got his first exhibition (watercolors) with a gallery called BQ. He landed in Cologne a couple of years later, still working day jobs. But most of this time seems like a haze, he said, because of drinking and drugs.

What he calls a “classic crossroads moment” came in 2003 when he was hospitalized for a pancreatic infection. He was 29, and the doctor warned him that he would be dead in three months if he didn’t stop drinking.

While he was in the hospital, the gallerist Joern Boetnagel (the “B” in BQ gallery) visited him with a proposal. The gallery had a spot in the Statements section of the art fair Art Basel, designed to showcase new artists: Would Kunath do it?

“So I’m laying in the hospital bed and felt a mixture between excitement and complete, instant fatigue,” Kunath said. “I got home and started this body of work that just spurted out of me.

“In retrospect I think it happened because I stopped drinking: I had the gift of doing a body of work with clarity, even though the work was all about confusion.”

The Statements show included a painting of a black door that says “If you leave me, can I come too?” There was also a video showing Kunath enacting a series of futile or vulnerable public actions — like trying to hand out flowers and hugs to strangers in a German train station — intercut with footage of an albino gorilla in captivity.

Jeff Poe of Blum & Poe said he was bowled over by the video, which BQ accidentally left running one night and he saw before the fair opened the next morning. “It wasn’t put together well or edited well. But I was emotionally devastated by it. I must have watched it four or five times in a row.”

He soon talked to Kunath’s German dealers about showing the work, even before checking in with his own gallery partner.

Another early fan was Fogle, the curator who bought his work for the Walker Art Center in 2004 and included him in the 2008 Carnegie International.

Fogle calls the new paintings antiheroic, suggesting that their humor prevents them from sliding into sentimentality. “They are almost like slapstick history paintings — Buster Keaton meets Caspar David Friedrich,” he said, referring to the German Romantic painter.

Drawn to L.A. like so many other artists, Kunath now talks about the tension in his work in terms of a sunshine-noir dynamic as well. And he has planted references to Southern California throughout his new work — the tennis rackets, images of ripe fruit and a funny face carved into an orange among them.

The video, which uses Kunath sculptures as props, is even more steeped in the area, shot on a beach in Malibu among other sites. The main — and only — character is a despairing, aging man who is handsome enough he could have been an actor. The man goes sailing in the Santa Monica Bay, tries to fry an egg in a skillet on the beach, and moves through other (largely improvised) vignettes in the film trying to connect to someone or maybe anyone.

But his phone is unplugged; his suitcase is flooded with water; connections fail. In the final scene he rests his head on a bowl filled with tiny cactuses, as though it were a pillow.

The video, and for that matter the show as a whole, displays so much naked emotion that you can almost feel the edgy contemporary art crowd begin to squirm.

The sheer quantity of works also makes some people nervous, with at least one competing dealer suggesting the show should have been half the size.

Kunath shrugs off the criticism, suggesting it says more about the current fetish for minimalism than his own work.

“Sometimes you go into a gallery and there’s this little color-field painting and a little feather nearby. I’ve seen so much of that,” he said. “I feel like it’s time for some content.”