

KUNSTVEREIN GARTENHAUS

10 Sept – 31 Oct 2026

STUART MIDDLETON

1000oz

Installed across KUNSTVEREIN GARTENHAUS' two rooms is a series of highly pigmented paintings made using human milk protein as a binder.

The milk has been sourced from a wet-nurse in the UK who sells surplus milk on the grey market (since selling human milk for consumption is otherwise prohibited). The size of each painting is determined by how much milk a baby consumes over a set period: an hour, a day, a week. The total quantity of milk is 1000oz, and the quantity of paint that is produced from that dictates the number of works in the series.

The pigments all carry their own histories of extraction. Lapis from Badakhshan Province in Afghanistan. Vermilion from Spanish mines worked by prisoners. Cochineal from insects harvested by indentured labourers in Oaxaca. The work sets these material histories against the chauvinism and theatre of painting itself, locating the canvas as a surface that is bound by cycles of labour and exploitation on a molecular level.

The paint is hand-made using a traditional method. Protein is separated using acid to curdle the milk, then dissolved in lime to create a binder, which is combined with pigment ground through mulling. Casein (milk protein) binders date to medieval times and are regarded as the most "characterless" binders historically used in colour charts for pigment traders.

Many of the pigments are chronic neurotoxins, heavy metals, systemic and cellular poisons. Some, like the natural lakes, are destroyed by exposure to daylight. Some, like certain blacks and bismuths, are edible or used in cosmetics. The paintings themselves, whilst consumably-scaled "desirable objects", are materially unstable, potentially dangerous, and in some cases bordering on auto-destruction.

The work explores what ethical frameworks govern art-making, whose labour is visible and compensated, and how the use of bodily fluids destabilises ideas of authorship and ownership. It contrasts the body that produces with the body that consumes and the moral judgements ascribed to both.

At a time of economic instability and environmental contamination, it also reflects on questions of surplus. Can waste be precious? How should we dispose of things? These questions extend to value itself. What is worth more, art or life? What is the value of art? What is considered legitimate work?

The exhibition is conceived as a total installation, continuing an approach Middleton has developed over the past decade. This shapes administrative elements such as titling and cataloguing information, as well as environmental aspects of the show, particularly the treatment of light and movement through the space. On entering the Kunstverein from the street, visitors will move through near darkness, letting their eyes adjust before entering the brightly lit gallery.

Alongside the works, there is a transcription of a conversation between the artist and a close friend who works as a midwife in the UK, based on a series of telephone calls that took place during the making of the exhibition.

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Stuart Middleton

Stuart Middleton (b. 1987, Crewe, UK) works across a wide range of media. He has had solo exhibitions at Sploj, Machynlleth; Clemetin Seedorf, Cologne; Chapter NY, New York; Carlos/Ishikawa, London; Künstlerhaus Graz; Tramway, Glasgow; and ICA London. His work has been shown in group exhibitions at Raven Row, London; Villa Imperiale, Pesaro; National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC; Greene Naftali, New York; Kunsthhaus Glarus; and Camden Arts Centre, London, among others. He lives and works in West Wales.

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 Federal Ministry
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 **Stadt
Wien**

 **Josefstadt**

KUNSTVEREIN GARTENHAUS Piaristengasse 26/2, 1080 Vienna
info@kunstverein-gartenhaus.com