PAW

MIXED UP BY MOTION

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SEP 19 - NOV 14, 2026

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A painted horse stands in a meadow at night. Life-sized, drawn on paper in broad strokes of deep violet and then mounted on cardboard, it has been placed among a herd of real horses. At first, the animals keep their distance. By morning, however, hoofprints bear witness to their growing curiosity and to a nocturnal encounter with this unfamiliar apparition. For a moment, the image has slipped from its assigned role. It has been looked at, examined and touched, perhaps taken for a counterpart and answered as one. This arrangement, simple yet precise, brings central aspects of Johanna Wagner's artistic practice into view. The photographs gathered in the exhibition *mixed up by motion* at PAW condense a layered process of painting, object-making and performative staging into pictorial spaces where representation and reality continually fold into one another. Wagner's works develop through a succession of interrelated stages. Painted forms are mounted onto supports, cut out and introduced into spatial settings, where they initiate actions and encounter surroundings that cannot be fully controlled. By capturing these encounters, photography draws the different elements of the artistic process together into a new pictorial reality whose meaning extends far beyond the documentary. Directed flash pulls colours, bodies and objects from the darkness, while deep shadows, reflections and intense hues lend the photographs the painterly quality through which Wagner's thinking in images continues across the boundaries of individual media.

The horse, for instance, derives from an image in Eadweard Muybridge's celebrated series *The Horse in Motion*. At the end of the nineteenth century, Muybridge's photographic studies broke the gallop down into individual phases, revealing movements that had previously escaped the human eye. Wagner lifts a single figure from this early history of the moving image and carries the motion already latent within it beyond the historical motif, across different media, temporalities and ways of seeing. A photographic sequence becomes a painted object; the object's physical presence gives rise to an action, which in turn enters the photographic image once more. Whereas Wagner frequently appeared before the camera in earlier works, placing her own body at the centre of the scene, recent works increasingly make room for other protagonists, among them animals. The artistic process thus opens onto a form of encounter that exists beyond a human order of images and understands the animal as a perceiving and acting subject. This reversal touches upon a long art- historical tradition in which animals have largely figured as motifs, symbols and screens for human projections. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the hunting still life, where the bodies of slain animals attest to possession, wealth and humanity's command over nature. The animal could be seen, while its own perspective remained outside the image. Wagner unsettles this order by appropriating a still from wildlife-camera footage through painting and hanging it at the precise spot in the forest where a fox had previously

appeared. Whether the fox ever encountered its own portrait remains unknown. Deer, a badger and several birds, however, were recorded by Wagner as they paused before the image. The photograph thus registers an act of viewing whose meaning remains open and which, for that very reason, unsettles the assumed authority of the human gaze.

In *Mezzo Mix*, Wagner extends similar questions to the history of still life and its vocabulary of signs. Painted in acrylic on cotton, mounted on cardboard and cut out by hand, the individual elements come together as a movable installation in space. Wagner is particularly interested in the original linguistic image underlying the art-historically established concept of Vanitas. The Hebrew word *häväl*, which may be translated as “a breath of wind,” was rendered as *vanitas* in the Latin Bible. While Vanitas crystallised over the centuries into an established pictorial repertoire, the breath of wind retains, for Wagner, something fleeting and barely graspable. This idea finds its counterpart in a flag bearing the word “Windhauch.” It is carried, turned and immersed in water until its lettering merges with its reflection and shifts into new abstract configurations. Language, too, appears as a material in motion, its meaning repeatedly rearranged between writing, body and image. The exhibition *mixed up by motion* thus unfolds as a constellation of images, gazes and acts of translation. In the dark, meadow, forest and water become temporary stages upon which things briefly depart from their accustomed order. The painted meets the living, writing dissolves into reflection, and animals become viewers. Movement here describes far more than physical action. It encompasses the passages between media as well as shifts in meaning and perspective. Wagner’s photographs condense these processes into images whose form arises through encounter and remains open to its contingencies.

Text: Rosa Windt