

Simon Lehner

My Mountain Has No Summit

Simon Lehner's first solo exhibition at KOW introduces the Vienna-based artist (b. 1996) with sculptures and a new cycle of paintings. Toxic models of masculinity, which Lehner has previously examined in a private and pop-cultural context, he now pursues further and in doing so uncovers (self-)destructive psychologies that have long been collective in many societies.

The show opens with a classic family portrait. Drained of color and slickly glossy, as though they had sprung from a 3D printer, father, mother, daughter and sons embody the non-soul of pseudo-documentary soaps and TikTok trends, those forms of everyday theater whose consumption rehearses the reproduction of the status quo. His protagonists look like avatars generated by media technology, identitarian stereotypes coursing through their veins like algorithms.

Yet as a tour of Lehner's exhibition reveals, he isn't interested in the well-known perversions of contemporary identity formation—his is a much more penetrating gaze into the psychology and physiology of the relevant—and impacted—protagonists, which may include us as well. As human consumables, as worn-down bodies, as wastage of self.

A human construct is lying on the floor in front of the family portrait. It is moving in a circle, second by second, dragging across the floor. A human watch hand, though one that indicates nothing beyond the painful attrition of the flesh in the uncompromising tick-tock of the norm.

We encounter the family's son again in Lehner's painting, a self-portrait in a Schwarzeneggerian pose. Nude, well-shaped, with a sheen of golden-brown chromaticism. But what darkness looms in the background, on the sumptuous bed? The jacked bro's self-conquest? The numbers indicated on the picture's surface are familiar from the galley proofs of reproduction technology. Red -2 here, yellow +4 there, to touch it all up a bit. We appear to be peeking into the teenage backroom of relentless self-improvement, into the male-identity workshop, where physique is everything and the inner life does not hold.

Upstairs the family ensemble's father figure reappears in low-angle-shot poses. The reproductive chieftain has ascended to the heavens in no fewer than seven copies, floating his aging asses and genitals in the infinite with the natural unconcern of a patriarch—but the setting is a compositional confine, an introverted structure awash in narcissistic self-fondling.

To call Simon Lehner's pictures paintings is to understand them as compositions in the classical sense and, sometimes, style, often painted on wood, although they transpose the genre and its techniques into the digital age.

Lehner harnesses AI tools to generate his motifs out of private and collective visual archives. He paints them together with a robot, his hand and the machine's meeting over the canvas. His compositional skill and eye for color are unmistakable. What's crucial for his pictorial conceptions is his grasp of traumatic structures—memory loops, panicked distortions of reality, losses of information and context—which he deftly translates into aesthetic forms.

Then there's the technological and algorithmic "remote control" over various levels of decision-making that he brings to bear in the creative process and that pointedly undercuts his authorship. Purely practically speaking, his pictures come into being between maximum control and forays toward its loss. This makes his process predestined for a study of individual and social data traumas.

Alexander Koch