

LATEFA WIERSCH

Hannibal

19 January – 13 April 2025

DORTMUNDFR

Some things are too large and overpowering to be able to be understood in the present by a single person; they can only be recognised in simulation and being lived through again, in their restaging. **Latefa Wiersch** (*1982 in Dortmund, lives in Zurich) works with performance, sculpture, video and photography, and for several years has been creating roughly sewn puppet figures from variously coded materials such as fabric, clothing, leather, artificial hair, toys, found objects, sawn-up furniture, wire, wood and filling. Through the spatial installation of narrative scenes she breaks the social level down to an individual dimension in order to examine the past and present of post-migrant identity in Germany. The puppets – with their social and cultural markers, their familiar attributes from pop culture and their multiple and ambiguous references to contemporary history – are the doppelgängers of the artist and her social setting. From exhibition to exhibition, they are re-clothed and re-contextualised, the figures differently staged and related to one another through their flexible skeleton structures. Their patched faces are mirrors of fragmented lives, gaps and the scars of racism and colonialism.

In the exhibition at Dortmunder Kunstverein, Latefa Wiersch restages parts of the housing block *Hannibal II* in Dortmund-Dorstfeld, where the artist grew up in the 1980s and 90s. *Hannibal II* was constructed in 1976 as the architectural realisation of West Germany's intended promise to all its citizens in the early 1970s: affordable, accessible housing and a social mix. But factors such as the lack of meeting places, dark corners, staff shortages, anonymity and tenant fluctuation swiftly shattered these ideals here and in many other high-rise developments. After the fire at London's *Grenfell Tower* in 2017, the fire safety of many housing complexes was reviewed throughout Germany: Only a month after the Grenfell catastrophe, *Hannibal II* was compulsorily evacuated and closed off within only a few hours due to construction and planning defects in the ventilation. 753 people, unable to take much with them, became homeless, and renovation delays made *Hannibal II* an example of citizens' powerlessness against internationally

DORTMUNDER KUNSTVEREIN E.V.
RHEINISCHE STRASSE 1
44137 DORTMUND

FON: (0231) 57 87 36
INFO@ DORTMUNDER-KUNSTVEREIN.DE
WWW.DORTMUNDER-KUNSTVEREIN.DE

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operating investors.

The exhibition turns the utopia of the early 1970s into an architectural model once again, but this time life sized, like a spaceship that has landed in the exhibition space. It is the backdrop and playing field for Latefa Wiersch's figures and objects, through which the artist opens an opportunity to review history and experiences of non-white German identities.

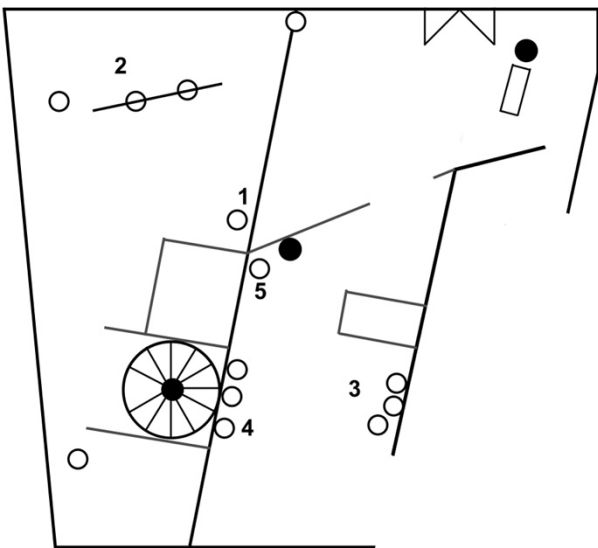
Appearing early in the cultural history of play, the puppet is a focus for the projection of feelings and a means of exploring one's own fantasies. In re-enacting stories, puppets can also serve to overcome experiences through repetition.

In reference to the android puppet Olympia in E.T.A. Hoffmann's short story 'The Sandman' (1816), the founder of psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud, developed a theory of the uncanny ('Das Unheimliche', 1919). In his consideration of puppets he locates this feeling at the unclear threshold they occupy between dead object and living subject. Latefa Wiersch's work recurrently balances on this threshold, which it concentrates into ambiguous scenes that seem to straddle times:

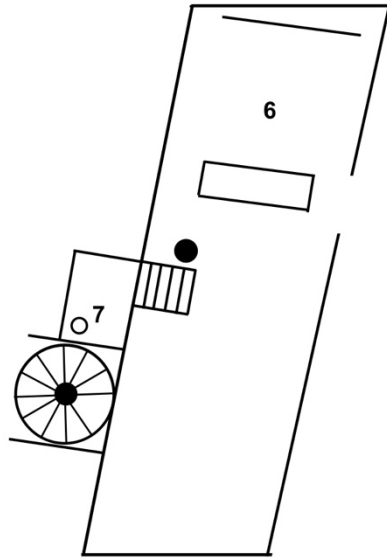
Scene **(1) *Comeback*** (2025), near the balconies, can be read as a self-portrait of the artist as a child. In superheroine costume, seated on a motorcycle, she looks towards a miniature figure doing gymnastics on rings hanging from a climbing frame. Scene **(2) *The German Chapter*** (2024) consists of a figure with facial features derived from the artist's Dortmund-born grandfather, a sports reporter whose activities included co-editing an ambivalent volume on working-class sport in 1936. In a white shirt and tie he watches a life-sized gymnast on a climbing frame and a prize-winning pair of legs working out while leaning against a pillar.

The interior of the Hannibal set is designed as an allusion to a teenager's bedroom in which television is part of the space: **(3) *Tic Tac Toe*** (2025) deals with the era of music TV with channels like VIVA and the first German-speaking black women's band Tic Tac Toe (1995–2001, 2005–2007). The figures in the room display miscellaneous references and codes reflecting a German perspective on the United States and the apparent implicitness of black artists there – an ambivalent attitude that arose at the time from a lack of role models in the German context and a treatment of blackness as something located elsewhere (othering). The staging pays homage to the three female rappers and opens a door onto a historical turn different from the toxic media coverage experienced by the band. This is implied through a juxtaposition with the installation **(4) *Pssst...*** (2025) in the same space.

(5) *Beyond the Circle (About Black Dada)* (2024) is a carousel-like mobile that deals with the objectivation and sexualisation of black bodies from a white perspective, and alongside a miniature puppet of Josephine Baker it also includes the face of Walt Disney's Mickey Mouse. This figure alludes to portrayals in



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minstrel shows – racist entertainments originating in the United States in the early 19th century in which white people with black-painted faces (blackfacing) and white gloves poked fun at black people.

Upstairs the stop-motion animation (6) *Original Features* (4' 40", 2022) uses a hybrid figure – who might represent both the artist's Moroccan father and the actor El Hedi ben Salem (1935–1977) – to follow the trail of lost North African identities in Europe. El Hedi ben Salem was the leading actor in Rainer Werner Fassbinder's film *Ali: Fear Eats the Soul* (1974) and also the director's lover. He died three years after filming under suspicious circumstances in a French prison. His similarity to Latefa Wiersch's father, who came to Dortmund as a migrant worker at the Hoesch steelworks (today Thyssen Krupp) and other factories, dissolves in figure (7) *Original Features* (2022), who looks down on the events below from the Hannibal balcony.

*Latefa Wiersch (*1982 in Dortmund, lives in Zurich) works in sculpture, moving image and performance. She has been a fellow at the Swiss Institute New York (2024) and the recipient of the Swiss Art Award (2023) and the Swiss Performance Award (2022). This exhibition is the first presentation of her work in an institutional solo exhibition in Germany.*

EXHIBITION

Curator:	Rebekka Seubert
Assistant curator:	Linda Schröer
Construction:	Robert Fernys
Construction assistant:	Nils Blumberg
Press and Publicity:	Philip Michael

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