

Ian Waelder –Bystander (Moth Joke)

Neuer Kunstverein Gießen
Gießen, DE
20.01 – 02.03.2024

Exhibition curated by Isabelle Tondre

Press release:

“A moth goes into a podiatrist’s office...” is how Norm Macdonald’s infamous joke begins, during a guest appearance on *The Tonight Show* in 2009. Unlike classic bar jokes that quickly meet their punchline, Macdonald’s act took a lengthy turn into the troubled life of a moth, in a sinuous Kafkaesque monologue that went on for several minutes. According to rumours, the comedian had no prepared material and seven minutes to fill, covering for the short-notice cancellation of another guest of the show. As the improvised piece finally reached its end, the show’s host Conan O’Brien shook his head in a burst of laughter and relief. “So, Norm,” he retorted, “we’re pretty much out of time.”

Time, and how it occupies space, are central concerns in Ian Waelder’s work. Through a rich range of media spanning from small-scale photographs to immersive in situ installations, Waelder’s artistic practice explores as a common thread the passing, stretching and suspension of time. As if to break with the seriousness of this ambition, humour and sarcasm never lie far in the artist’s operative process; persistent references to sketch comedy and popular talk-shows balance Waelder’s existential preoccupations with memory, identity and everyday life. Illuminating the porch of the Neue Kunstverein Gießen, *Bystander (Moth Joke)* is a nocturnal exhibition that ponders on the intimacies and politics of the entrance door. For his first solo-exhibition in Germany, Waelder’s work is presented entirely outside of the Kunstverein and becomes visible with the night fall.

Built in 1937 as a public toilet and later on a kiosk, the pavilion of the Neue Kunstverein stands as a small landmark in the social fabric of the Licher Gabel and a carrier of individual and collective histories. Waelder’s work offers a scrutiny of its porch and surroundings. Through a varied use of light, the installation becomes an eye-catcher for the passerby to contemplate and be seen. Along the outside corridor of the building, three lamps (*Bystander 1–3*, 2024) temporarily hang from the ceiling. While akin to urban streetlights that guide the way for night walks, the flickering sculptures also evoke motion sensor lights at the entrance of a home. Upon closer inspection, black and white images are visible through the semi-opaque glass lamps. Excerpts from film scenes in which an Opel Olympia car consistently appears can be seen, alternating with images of hand gestures collected by the artist: hands assembling car parts, playing the piano or holding a friend, which stem from archive material and old family albums. Through the lens of his own biography, Waelder’s work is informed by an ongoing reconstruction of his family history in Germany, the last traces of which date back to 1939 with the fleeing to Chile of the Stuttgart pianist Friedrich Wälder, his grandfather. Waelder is the first member of his family to have returned to the country ever since, for his studies of fine arts in Frankfurt. The Opel Olympia, a car his grandfather owned and had to sell for a fraction of its price in order to finance his escape to South America, is a recurrent motive in his work.

The video installation *You who are the stranger (Moth Joke)* (2023), located on the steps of the Kunstverein, also evokes light as a signifier of physical presence. In a sequence of nine minutes that oscillate between the familiar and the strange, the camera wanders at the doorstep of a house, focusing on an automatic light that reveals nothing but the nightlife of buzzing insects. A sound piece titled *Departure (Radio)* (2024) in the background echoes the nearby traffic; blurring the noise of rain together with radio music, the piece is a field recording during a late night drive of the artist with his brother, captured in a moment of silence.

– Isabelle Tondre