

ON HOLD ON

Johanna Strobel

Municipal Gallery Cordonhaus Cham, Germany

July 6 –August 11, 2019

Johanna Strobel's interest in systems and syntax forms the conceptual basis of her exhibition ON HOLD ON at Städtische Galerie Cordonhaus Cham. The title already suggests dual meanings: "on hold" implies a pause, a moment of suspension or anticipation—something set aside or reserved. "Hold on" is both a gesture and a verbal interjection, a call to stop, grasp, or reflect. Both meanings are enacted through the works themselves, which operate through formal precision, repetition, and subtle disruption—inviting viewers into a logic that is simultaneously rigorous and playful.

Strobel has extensively transformed the gallery space itself. Peepholes now open onto unexpected views—of satellite dishes, distorting mirrors, or an index finger pointing back at the viewer where windows once were. Trompe-l'oeil wall paintings simulate closed doors and imaginary rooms, extending the architecture into illusion. The result is an environment that oscillates between suggestion and transparency.

The gallery is divided into two rooms. In one, Strobel presents a series of paintings; in the other, a group of terracotta sculptures. True to her systemic approach, the two bodies of work are not isolated but deeply connected. The sculptures don't impose themselves on the space but seem to emerge from it. Their material—terracotta—directly echoes the gallery's floor, a Renaissance tile surface that the artist subtly amplifies through form and repetition. These multiples, placed directly on the ground without pedestals, suggest that the building itself has produced the works. The brick motif continues in details like the pillowcases on museum stools or the curtain that visitors pass through, as if through the wall itself, to enter one of the rooms.

Johanna Strobel's work consistently avoids biographical or expressive gestures. Her paintings are highly precise, executed with a consistency that resists the traditional "painterly" mark. The brushwork is controlled, the visual vocabulary exact—more akin to design, typography, or coding than to expressionist traditions. And yet, the paintings revolve around gesture: each one stages a spatial structure within which manicured hands (identical but for the color of the nail polish) reach, probe, hold, or manipulate other elements—pyramids, spheres, ribbons, holes, bananas or tennis balls.

This approach recalls the Belgian surrealist René Magritte, especially in his attention to the differences between object and image, and to the systems that govern how we interpret them. In a 1936 work, *Ceci est un morceau de fromage*, Magritte placed a tiny painting of cheese beneath a real cheese dome. In a short text, he reflected on the absurdity of trying to "make a thought appear" by merely displaying an object or image of one. He emphasized how different forms of representation—image, word, object—operate within different systems, each with its own logic.

Johanna Strobel's alignment with Magritte is more structural than stylistic. Like him, she is deeply interested in the systems that underlie representation and meaning. Magritte's insights were shaped by the linguistic theories of Ferdinand de Saussure, who emphasized that the relationship between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary. This arbitrariness is

something Strobel seems to work with: not to bridge the gap between image and language, but to explore how meaning can be generated within a visual system, independent of narrative or expression.

Her paintings, then, are not expressive in the traditional sense, but analytic. The recurring motifs function like modules—components within a closed but flexible system. The gestures of the hands change meaning depending on the objects they interact with or the spatial structures they inhabit. They might reach, grasp, intervene, or let go—but their intent is never fixed. These are gestures without expression, rendered in a way that suspends the emotion or subjectivity typically associated with gesture.

Paradoxically, Johanna's paintings do depict gestures—meaning-open gestures—whereas that very use of “gesture” is avoided in her process. In doing so, she places the focus on the possible transmission of an idea, not on her artist persona. In Germany in particular, this expressive, internalized approach has a long tradition and is still equated with spontaneity and genius. Or as the German anti-fascist art historian Carl Einstein succinctly put it in his critique of European sculpture: “These sculptures were more confessions of genetics than objectified form.”

The term “site-specific” is one of many overused terms in art, and often it simply means that something was placed in a space. However, Johanna has taken the site-specific very seriously here in Cham: Some of the sculptures and spatial interventions are designed—unlike the paintings—to shed their work-object quality and almost merge into the space. The gesture these works perform is precisely not their assertion against the room, but with the room. With a few exceptions, Johanna has worked entirely in the terracotta colors of the floor. Some motifs from the paintings also appear in the sculptures: Johanna also works here with serial elements, repetitions, mirroring, and the motif of looking through something. This restraint and subtlety in the works also clear the way for a very coquettish genre: the perfectly titled work “Topfkopf” is a selfportrait of the artist as a flowerpot. What more could one ask for?

Photo credit: Dominik Bindl

Selected work details:

ON HOLD ON, 2019

Installation (terracotta, drywall, acrylic mirrors, custom print tennis balls, oil on canvas, fabric, venetian blinds

same same sad, 2019, terracotta, acrylic mirror, dimensions variable

kopftopf, 2019, terracotta, lavender, approx. 7 x 7 x 7 in (18 x 18 x 18 cm)

Augenbricks, ceramics, 2019, multiple parts, each approx. 2 x 3 x 8 in (ca. 5 x 7 x 20 cm)

blind side, 2019, ceramics, venetian blinds, dimensions variable

Agenda, 2019, series of 11 paintings, oil on canvas, 30 x 22 inches, 60 x 40 inches and 40 x 30 inches (76 x 56 cm, 102 x 76 cm and 152 x 112 cm)