

WILL-O'-WISP



DOMINIKA BEDNARSKY & PAUL K. MÜLLER

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A *will-o'-the-wisp* (German: *Irrlicht*) refers to a flickering glow that appears in moors, swamps, or at the edges of forests: a hovering, elusive light that promises orientation and simultaneously withdraws it. In folklore and superstition, an ambiguous nature is attributed to it. Sometimes will-o'-the-wisps are considered the souls of the deceased who find no rest or must atone for past deeds. More often, however, they appear as the work of goblins, nature spirits, or demons; beings that lead travelers off the path, lure them deeper into the moor, or lead them astray in the forest.

This motif of seduction and slipping away, of luring and vanishing, describes a state of a hybridity: a suspended existence between visibility and dissolution, between promise and danger. The will-o'-the-wisp is eerie and at the same time possessed of a peculiar beauty, devilish perhaps, but also playful in its flickering.

These ungraspable appearances are also reflected in the figures of the works by Paul K. Müller, most of which were created during his residency at Studio Hanniball. They often begin with seemingly simple, flat backgrounds: horizons, dark fields, surfaces with a tactile feel, monochrome spaces. Yet the longer one looks, the more these grounds set into motion. Waves, streaks, and dense structures, surfaces that sometimes still seem to breathe, open up a visual world behind the surface. Here, the pictorial ground is not a flat background but functions as a stage, a weather condition, or a memory store.

Within these, individual elements such as objects, fragments, lettering, or beings appear, and one believes to recognize them directly: the fence in front of the property, the wall that must be overcome before entering the well-known piece of woodland, a figure we told each other about so often, this one particular sign. They all seem like found objects from stories one has heard before, like images from texts, dreams, or casual observations. Müller collects fragments from narratives, spaces, and everyday moments and assembles them in such a way that meaning emerges but is never codified. Sometimes it is like in a fairy tale whose logic one feels without being able to fully explain it, and one follows them like a light in the distance in the hope of orientation, though knowing

the possibility of being misled. Those fences and walls do not mark boundaries but remain permeable. Something seems to lie behind them; attainable, even if not fully visible. The figures emerge as smoke, dots, shadows, or condensations; a slightly cozy and simultaneously somewhat eerie atmosphere arises, reminiscent of stories, legends, and half-forgotten childhood images.

Will-o'-the-wisps also appear repeatedly in literature. In the Walpurgisnacht of Goethe's *Faust*, they flicker through the scenery as ghostly companions; seductive, mischievous, unpredictable. Older poems and songs refer to their localization in moors, swamps, and graveyards, emphasizing their ambiguous nature: between warning and magic, superstition and poetry.

Dominika Bednarsky's ceramic works provide luminous, idiosyncratic counterpoints to this. Her candlesticks take up motifs from still lifes and vanitas representations and tip them into the playful and the absurd. The candlestick is a simple everyday object and at the same time highly charged: with religious imagery, with solemnity, with transience, but also with the transition from this world to the hereafter. The burning candle, the dim light between brightness and darkness, is an ancient motif.

With Bednarsky, however, these forms are unexpectedly shifted: a golden appearance meets semolina. Pasta becomes ornament, a status symbol turns into a pasta product. The presumed value begins to waver, symbolism is undermined with humor, but not without resonance. Bednarsky's new works stand in a „pasta line“ with the trophy for the „best pasta eater“ from her series of trophies for absurd talents, while simultaneously recalling the pasta rings in which value and material already enjoyably collided.

What remains is not an unambiguous narrative, but a flickering. A moment of uncertainty and movement. Like a will-o'-the-wisp, meaning eludes us at the same moment it appears. Stories are not linear, and it is often precisely the fantastic things that prove to be particularly real.

VERENA OSTHOFF