

Dear Emily and John,

As you know I am not going to come for the opening of my show *Paint-It-Yourself*. I could imagine this might leave you in a strange social situation so I thought I could explain in a few sentences what it's about.

First of all this show is a bit of a reaction to the sameyness of a lot of painting. It's almost like the whole thing turned into zombie formalism. Figurative formalism. Add the number of older white men going around talking about "real" painting which they are finally "allowed" to do, and you have a boring conservative atmosphere that I am at risk of being dragged into with my own paintings. So let's clear the decks. "You want a painting show, well then paint-it-yourself." It doesn't matter what it looks like anyway. Probably with my own history of readymade painting right back to the ones that remained unpainted at "The Opening" I can get away with this kind of shit and still call it a painting show. I'd anyway been musing about doing massively zoned out abstract paintings which led to the vague thought that this would mean showing only blank canvases and paint.

But there is something more. Starting with my exhibition at Nousmoules in Vienna in 2018 where I claimed to be "Not Doing a Show in FPÖ Austria" but actually did one, I have been working on an idea of doing a show and not doing one at the same time. This continued later that year when I moved Overduin & Co. from LA to Amsterdam so that I could show there instead of in Trump's USA. But then I went straight back to LA and did a second, simultaneous, exhibition where I sat around chatting with visitors for the show's duration.

It's a little bit hard to explain what I was driving at. I was setting up a situation in which multiple realities can live side by side, but not in a metaphysical way. I wanted to find a language that was both left wing and could use irony to help me navigate worsened political contexts. So instead of using right wing material as a left wing joke, I would make the simplistic left gesture as a formal joke in relation to a more rigorous hypothesis. I was serious about not doing "business as usual" in the US, but all this really involved was changing my practice to mark this new context. And then making art in the US which was more typically "Merlin" than ever.

In the LA / Amsterdam project I was thinking about how the current political situations in the EU and the USA mirror each other, one still "neo-liberal", the other bordering on far right. In my view, capitalism's crises do not cause it to break down, but instead it uses supposedly external factors like nationalism or climate change to force itself onward. My two simultaneous exhibitions were intended as a metaphor for how the far right model acts as a kind of fear lever, a threat intensifier

for the neo-liberal model. And maybe the centrists have a similar effect, by continuously re-creating the far right's starting conditions. These two models madly arbitrage each other and forge new totalities, in a ratchet effect. And through that summing-up process what previously justified the existing order and made it seem to make sense is "cracked". It's an almost Steve Bannonesque process of seizing, flipping the totality on its head. Every debate is changed within these freshly minted regimes. For example the injunction we are presented with not to fight capitalism, but save capitalism - save the EU, save the Democrats.

This picture of what might be happening was developed after, and by means of, my own "two locations at once" art idea. One gallery stands in for the other, as in therapy - to lay the dialectic out, keep its inner configuration open. For our current show I was first considering putting the blank canvases in a gallery in one part of the world, and the box of paint in another gallery in some other place. But then I thought it might be more interesting if they were both in New York, as if the box had just teleported through a secret door, to make a single, fused, half-show. And there is still a physical distance: in late 2018 the paintings remained in the EU, and I flew to LA, but this time the paintings are in New York, but I'm not showing up.

All the very best, good luck, have fun!!

Merlin

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