

Cosima zu Knyphausen | *Gute Nacht*
June 24th- August 8th, 2026

Cosima zu Knyphausen's second exhibition with Sebastian Gladstone takes its point of departure from a little-known Symbolist painting which makes up for its present-day obscurity in the controversy it caused in its own time. When Hermione von Preuschen submitted *Mors Imperator* to the Berlin Salon in 1888, it was rejected as an antimonarchist scandal. A crowned skeleton was taken to be a sly attack on the then admittedly ancient Kaiser Wilhelm I. Her Symbolist meditation on a well-trodden vanitas theme, "Death Rules," became the considerably more provocative *Death to the Ruler!* Appalled by the accusation, von Preuschen quickly wrote to the emperor to explain herself. He politely replied that he had "no problem with the painting." It was rejected nonetheless.

The episode poses an awkward question. If neither the artist nor its supposed target understood the painting as anti-monarchist, does that mean it wasn't? Symbolism was not exactly a movement known for political sharpness. Mallarmé famously insisted that naming things directly was vulgar, suggestion was truer than declaration. "To name an object is to suppress three-fourths of the pleasure of the poem which is made to be divined bit by bit: to suggest, there's the dream." They were more about vibe than statement. To read *Mors Imperator* as a political caricature was therefore not only a misreading of intention, in fact, it ran counter to the Symbolist project itself. And yet the misunderstanding persists because the image itself remains difficult to ignore, a crowned skeleton is a crowned skeleton is a crowned skeleton.

Other paintings in *Gute Nacht* depart from works by realist painter Adolph Menzel, whose immense popularity during his lifetime paradoxically confines his modern-day radius to Berlin. He painted lavish ballroom scenes of Wilhelmine high society, the candid first meeting of two emperors, and a flute concert played by Frederick the Great in candlelit Sanssouci. Beautifully dressed bodies drink, gossip, and touch each other up, habits that appear remarkably resilient to history. In zu Knyphausens adaptations, heads all turn to skulls. This has a nightmarish effect but also points to Menzel's own particular engagement with the past, as all of these scenes were painted a century after their occurrence as minute historical reconstructions. His figures seem all too alive as Menzel studied physiognomy, interiors and costumes with minute precision, Frederick's face famously constructed from his death mask. Here the von Preuschen dilemma arises once again. Does death rule, or are we all already dead?

The paintings brought together in this exhibition are populated by figures and stories that continuously elude an own context. None of these images arrive untouched to the present as they each carry collective interpretation, projection and desire. Narcissus eternally gazes into the pond. Aesop's frogs yearn for a king. Monarchs and rulers will die.

An exception to the gathering of boney figures are the references to early homoerotic scenes of film history. Here, fleshed characters receive a tender goodnight kiss; oppressed girls from the loving teacher in an authoritarian boarding school, or the deathly wounded soldier from his "best friend".

Truth is, we will never be able to say what the actual meaning of *Mors Imperator* was, or is today. Contemporary criticism often assumes there is something virtuous about exposing what lies beneath appearances, but I prefer the way *Gute Nacht* indulges in paintings inherent superficiality, not in a derogatory sense, but a literal one. Painting is a medium of surfaces, appearances, reflections. Not shallow, but surface-bound. Narcissus drowns trying to penetrate the image. Art history is perhaps not so different: a long record of our attempts to derive meaning from appearances.

- Dara Jochum