

new work

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Katharina Wulff dexterously forms a surreal universe inflected by wide-ranging references, drawing inspiration from literature, Old Master paintings, and found photographs, among other sources. Even a small selection of her work moves across vast art historical periods: one discerns hints of Henri Matisse's decorative motifs, Pierre Klossowski's unsettling figures, and William Blake's otherworldly symbology. A viewer travels from the dark satire of George Grosz to the cheerful palette of Florine Stettheimer. Despite this historical resonance, Wulff's pictures are decidedly of the present and define a body of work uniquely her own.

At turns whimsical and macabre, naive and sophisticated, her paintings draw the viewer into an imaginary realm marked by diverse and distant locales: grassy green knolls, rocky ocean cliffs, and urban sidewalks. Strange animals often populate the settings; alluring visages depicted up close are frequently left half-painted or disfigured. She deftly interweaves antimonies into her body of work, combining delicacy with strength, vulnerability with terror. She similarly moves fluidly between moods and color palettes so that each painting seems distinct but retains a tenuous connection to her larger body of work.

Color and setting define many of the landscapes and portraits. The rooftop vistas, detailed mosaic patterns, and twisting medina alleys of Marrakech (her home) inspire her paintings of the past several years. Her fusing of unique sources generates a rich texture of associations. One untitled urban nocturne from 2011 took inspiration from the German expressionist film *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920), though in Wulff's painting the silent thriller's location becomes the streets of Marrakech. In this painting, as in others, perspectives are flattened, creating spaces that are compact and ambiguous. Some canvases are heavily built up with a mixture of charcoal and oil; others possess faint graphite outlines and thin washes.

An elusive sense of narrative suffuses each scene, alternately hysterical and haunting, serene and inviting. While certain characters and settings seem to reappear throughout the works, loosely implying narrative threads, each picture ultimately stands as an autonomous work—a part



in an incongruous, ever-shifting whole. In her expressionistic and nuanced visionary terrain, meaning lies just beyond one's reach.

New Work: Katharina Wulff marks the artist's first solo exhibition in a U.S. museum and the first presentation of her work on the West Coast.

Apsara DiQuinzio
Assistant Curator of Painting and Sculpture

Offset, Labyrinthine, Oblique, Serpentine, Screened (How to Be Baffled)

That cat, or dog, or whatever it is, confounds me. The poor, misshapen creature sits on its haunches, alert and ridiculous, in the foreground of Katharina Wulff's painting *Nach dem Dreißigjährigen Krieg* (After the Thirty Years' War). It has enormous cartoon eyes and an awkward, obscenely muscled body—a goofy, unsettling combination. Its buff coat matches the rocks scattered across the blasted landscape, as if it were simply part of the scenery.

Yet this comical animal does not diminish the image's unearthly elegance. The scene should be absurd, but it is somehow another thing entirely. All cool colors and diffused, gentle light, this world exerts a seductive pull. It shunts me into its incomprehensible dream logic. I take that bizarre creature seriously. I want to know more about it; I wonder what it's thinking.

Wulff's work is steeped in a compelling unreality, even when the subjects are ostensibly conventional. Her inscrutable people and inexplicable places are as odd as the overtly fantastic scenarios. Elegant ladies with elaborate hairdos and old-fashioned outfits, stiff men with strange dead eyes, sylvan vistas that seem haunted, tense with uncertain import—all are touched with a sense of earnest enchantment.

Scenes and settings vary, but the affect is consistent: the feel is distinctive, like the scent of an unforgettable perfume. Trying to give a name to this signature affect, I fumble with paradoxes: stilted but voluptuous, arbitrary but assured, erotic but chaste, placid but sinister.

Yet Wulff offers something less mechanical than paradox. Her paintings are willful, guided by caprice. Her attentions wax and wane. At times she loses herself in patterns: the rococo whorls of a woman's hair, the

intricate topography of a rock face or a tile floor. Other times she settles for crude brushstrokes or reduced, telegraphic renderings. The visual syntax feels invented on the spot, a range of styles she picks up and drops at whim. She is a Weimar-era Expressionist one moment, a teenage girl doodling in a notebook the next.

There is pleasure to be taken from this indulgence, in the freedom with which Wulff shares her own pleasure. She revels in the decorative and the archaic, in misty green hills and pretty clothes. She delights in painterly eccentricities, glowing jewel-toned forms and skewed vertiginous perspectives.

Wulff is generous with pleasure, but she is stingy with meaning. Much of these images' curious power comes from what they withhold—psychology, first and foremost. She offers up people who are impassive, as blank and hollow as that preposterous cat. They are all surface—bits of clothing and physiognomy, sometimes not even that. They give nothing away.



Nach dem Dreißigjährigen Krieg (After the Thirty Years' War), 2007



But these not-quite characters stick with you; they get under your skin. As do the uninhabited landscapes, which seem like settings for an obscure activity just completed or not yet begun. (*Landscape for Happy Witches* is one of Wulff's titles. All her scenes feel as though they are for someone or something.) Whatever they are about, these images matter; they're invested with a puzzling intensity of purpose.

Looking at Wulff's work involves trying to untangle these investments: why have these particular people and places been chosen, and why are they worthy of the devotion lavished on them? Here the artist's intentions and identifications enter the story—at least, an imagined, projected version of them does. It's unclear whether Wulff is revealing any of herself in these images or if she is acting as ventriloquist for some invented persona. The paintings call forth the question: who, exactly, is speaking here?

Landscape for Happy Witches, 2008

Ultimately, looking at Wulff's work means allowing yourself to be baffled.

To be baffled is to have one's chosen path altered. Winds baffle a ship and keep it off its intended course. Baffles are impediments, surfaces that redirect flow. The history of defensive architecture contains an entire lexicon of baffles—offset, labyrinthine, oblique, serpentine, screened. These various types of entranceways, distinguished by deceptively angled walls and blind alleys, are meant to slow down intruders, hinder a forward march, and expose an invading army's vulnerable points. Encountering a baffle, your movements are no longer your own; your plan of attack becomes self-defeating.

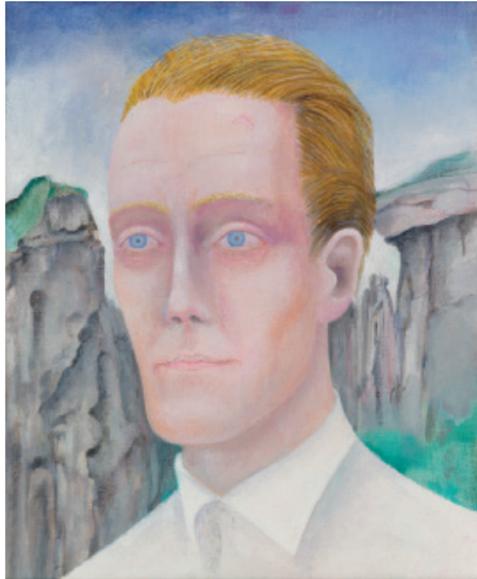
Wulff's paintings are filled with these sorts of trick entryways. Scenes of forthright loveliness invite the viewer forward with their apparent promise of easy satisfaction: beauty, romance, familiar fairy-tale narratives. In *Der vergessene Kontinent*

(The Forgotten Continent) a young couple sets out across the forgotten continent of the title, as though protagonists in a story of innocence and discovery. Minimally rendered, like clumsy paper dolls, they are imbued with an excess of tenderness. But this faceless pair's curious specificity—her prim, anachronistic costume, his jeans and surfer-dude shades—dislocates any simple reading. Other stories clearly lurk here, but their plots refuse to be unraveled. Trying to account for this image, one is endlessly buffeted about, delayed and detoured.

The true landscape of Wulff's work is this twisty mental space in between viewer and image. It is a forgotten continent of anticipation and projection, of empathetic response and uncertain identification. The action is here, not in the stilled and stately world portrayed on canvas.

And so the viewer becomes a character, along with the serious ladies, awkward men, and puzzling creatures of the paintings. It is strangely delightful to spend time with them. The magic of Wulff's work and its uncanny power come from this participatory theater, from the always unresolved dramas the artist stages and directs.

Steven Stern



Images courtesy Greene Naftali, New York, and Galerie Neu, Berlin. © Katharina Wulff.

Reverse, from left: *Die Verbindung* (The Connection), 2008. *Untitled*, 2010. *Untitled*, 2011.

The *New Work* series is organized by SFMOMA and is generously supported by Collectors Forum, the founding patron of the series. Major support is provided by Martha and Bruce Atwater, and Robin Wright and Ian Reeves.

Señor Blanco, 2008

Katharina Wulff was born in 1968 in Berlin and currently resides in Marrakech, Morocco. She studied painting at the Hochschule der Künste in Berlin. Wulff has had solo exhibitions at Greene Naftali, New York; Galerie Daniel Buchholz, Cologne, Germany; Galerie Neu, Berlin; Douglas Hyde Gallery, Dublin; Galerie Bleich-Rossi, Graz, Austria; and the Bonner Kunstverein, Bonn, Germany. She was a 2009 resident of Steep Rock Arts, in Washington, Connecticut, and her work has been featured in group exhibitions at CCS Bard Hessel Museum of Art, Annandale-on-Hudson, New York; the 4th Berlin Biennial, Berlin; Van Abbe Museum, Eindhoven, the Netherlands; Kunstverein Braunschweig, Braunschweig, Germany; Deutsche Guggenheim, Berlin; and the Hamburger Bahnhof, Berlin.

Works in the Exhibition

<i>Sheath</i> , 2006 Oil on canvas 18 3/8 x 25 15/16 in. (46.7 x 65.5 cm) Collection of Elizabeth Peyton	<i>Señor Blanco</i> , 2008 Oil on canvas 11 7/8 x 9 7/8 in. (30.2 x 25.1 cm) Collection of Melva Bucksbaum and Raymond Leary
<i>Harald</i> , 2007 Oil on canvas 15 3/4 x 11 3/4 in. (40 x 29.9 cm) Collection of Martin and Rebecca Eisenberg	<i>Die Verbindung</i> (The Connection), 2008 Oil on canvas 48 7/8 x 68 7/8 in. (122 x 175 cm) Olbricht Collection
<i>Nach dem Dreißigjährigen Krieg</i> (After the Thirty Years' War), 2007 Oil on canvas 22 1/8 x 29 5/8 in. (56 x 76 cm) Private collection, courtesy Galerie Neu, Berlin	<i>Burnt Orange</i> , 2010 Oil and charcoal on canvas 23 3/4 x 32 3/4 in. (60.3 x 83.2 cm) Collection of Susan and Leonard Feinstein
<i>Untitled</i> , 2007 Oil on canvas 13 3/4 x 11 7/8 in. (34.9 x 30.2 cm) Collection of Charlotte and Bill Ford	<i>Motorero</i> , 2010 Oil and charcoal on canvas 15 3/4 x 14 1/4 in. (40 x 36.2 cm) Courtesy the artist and Greene Naftali, New York
<i>Untitled</i> , 2007 Oil on canvas 11 3/4 x 9 1/2 in. (29.9 x 24.1 cm) Private collection	<i>Stadt im Dunkel</i> (Dark City), 2010 Oil and charcoal on canvas 15 1/2 x 11 3/4 in. (39.4 x 29.9 cm) Collection of Joel Wachs
<i>Untitled</i> , 2007 Oil on canvas 16 3/4 x 17 3/4 in. (40 x 45.1 cm) Collection of Martin and Rebecca Eisenberg	<i>Untitled</i> , 2010 Oil on canvas 13 3/4 x 18 in. (35 x 45.7 cm) Courtesy the artist and Greene Naftali, New York
<i>Der vergessene Kontinent</i> (The Forgotten Continent), 2007 Oil on canvas 63 x 90 1/2 in. (160 x 229.9 cm) Collection of Warren and Allison Kanders	<i>Untitled</i> , 2011 Oil on canvas 31 1/2 x 24 7/8 in. (80 x 62 cm) Private collection, courtesy Tajan SA
<i>Landscape for Happy Witches</i> , 2008 Oil on canvas 13 3/4 x 17 3/4 in. (34.9 x 45.1 cm) Private collection, courtesy Galerie Neu, Berlin	<i>Untitled</i> , 2011 Oil and charcoal on canvas 12 x 9 in. (30.5 x 22.9 cm) Courtesy the artist and Greene Naftali, New York
	<i>Untitled</i> , 2012 Oil and charcoal on canvas 25 3/8 x 20 1/2 in. (65.1 x 52.1 cm) Courtesy the artist and Greene Naftali, New York