

Danna Writes

ART AND POP CULTURE FROM THE MIDDLE EAST

BERNHARD BUHMANN'S PRETENDERS: THE MASKS OF SOCIAL MEDIA

I sat in the middle of Carbon 12's gallery space speaking quietly with the Austrian artist Bernhard Buhmann, but we were hardly alone. 10 gregarious characters surrounded us, and although they were painted in oils and acrylics on one-dimensional canvas, I felt that they could jump onto the concrete floor, shake themselves out, and join in our conversation at any moment.

Maybe it was their mismatched stockings or the way that they seemed able to almost dance off the canvas towards us, but I felt that there was something childlike and simple about these personalities as if they are trying too hard to be liked. 'The Pretenders,' the title of the artist's second solo show at the gallery, is a commentary on our social-media obsessed times and the addiction that many of us have to advertising only a glossy, edited version of ourselves and the most exciting aspects of our everyday lives to the outside world. The paintings explore how it is easily possible to lose oneself in the vicious circle of keeping up appearances. The sheer 2-metre height of each canvas leaves the artist and the characters with no place to hide insecurities or flaws.



Here's an excerpt from the quasi-philosophical conversation I enjoyed with the sociologist turned full-time artist:

DL: Given people's obsessions with selfies, appearances, and fashion here in Dubai, I find it very intriguing that you chose to present 'The Pretenders' here. Was that deliberate?

BB: There are 17 paintings in this series, 10 of which are here, all of which were completed in the past 5-6 months for this gallery space. I chose the 2 meters-high canvases to make the characters life-sized so you could feel their presence. In Dubai of course you see shiny and bright, big, impressive things, so of course this show particularly fits here, but you can see selfies in Europe too, where everyone has the need to change their roles very quickly, seeking attention with the desire to be known.

DL: Do you personally take selfies?

BB: No way, but I do have 17 of them displayed here! I don't believe that social media is bad and this show is not about criticizing people who use it. It's more about raising consciousness of how social media is utilized and examining what is missing when someone is immersed in the lifestyle of relying upon social media. In today's world it may be necessary for survival purposes to constantly reinvent yourself, to be able to make yourself new at a moment's notice—social media and these paintings reflect that environment.



DL: Do each of these characters represent a particular aspect of society or do you hope for the meaning to be more open-ended?

BB: It's open-ended. There is no single message or one particular way to view the show. The best art must open an entry point for you to find yourself. The best way an artwork can function is to pose something that touches you. Your strong reaction to that does not even have to be intellectual. It can be pure emotion. Even a color—a certain shade of bright red, for example—can ignite emotion.

DL: Is there an element of fear at play here?

BB: Yes, of course. They want to be bright and joyful, but you can see that underneath their masks they are grotesque. They try to hide their imperfections, and nearly all their skin is covered. Whenever they want to shirk responsibility, they can simply change their masks.



DL: Human beings rarely show all sides of themselves--we are made up of complex facets. Perhaps we prefer the fantasy of who someone appears to be, to the reality of who they really are beneath their thick mask.

DL: Describe your studio in Vienna.

BB: It's the stereotype of an artist's studio. It's a big space in an 18th century factory. I keep a guitar there and play it badly while I'm waiting for layers of paint to dry or puzzling over where to go next with a painting. I keep regular hours from 9 or 10 in the morning until 6 in the evening and then close the door.



Good Ideas: 'The Pretenders' runs at Carbon 12 on Alserkal Avenue through 28 October. For details go [here](#).

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