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## INTERVIEW WITH PHILIP MUELLER

by Sabrina Möller

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Only a few days from now, Philip Mueller is going to inaugurate his third solo exhibition at the Carbon12 Gallery in Dubai: "Dreams in Blue. The year Philip Mueller didn't wake up". In his interview with Sabrina Möller, Philip Mueller talks about what he dreamed about during that year, about who the masked people in superhero costumes are, and explains what all of this has to do with Viennese coffee houses.

**In January you're opening your third Solo Show at the Carbon12 Gallery in Dubai. As in your previous exhibitions at Carbon12, the title is quite long: "Dreams in blue. The year Philip Mueller didn't wake up." What did you dream about during that year?**

It was quite a difficult year. Lots of work. It had occurred to me to move into a huge apartment where I could both live and work. That was a big mistake. Everything got out of order. But I have to admit, it was an interesting time. For me, this exhibition is a coming to terms with that year. The title came about while I was already working on the exhibition. I only see the narrative reflected by the paintings once they are ready. Now, I see that I have processed the „Dreams in blue“. „Didn't wake up“ describes that year. It's totally honest.

**Small superheroes appear in these almost idyllic and yet anything but calm paintings: nonathletic copies of Batman and Robin wearing their characteristic capes over their underpants. What's that about? Who are these masked superheroes?**

That's my Gang!

**A real Gang?**

A secret society – called the Black Flamingos. They break away from everything and spend their time in nature, either alone or with each other. They wear masks to protect themselves from envious glares, drive nice cars such as the Citroën DS, or go horseback-riding. All of them are well-educated and do everything I enjoy. They are outlaws. Instead of working, they hunt. They can drink all day, it simply doesn't matter. At the same time, they are city people, drive city cars, and wear city clothes. It's all about an escape to the country. The only remaining city quality are the works' titles: the names of Viennese coffee houses.



**Why do those masks always bring up Batman and Robin?**

In the beginning it's really them. Ever since my very first exhibition in Vienna, "The Energy of the Mask", masks have been part of my work. Batman would be the most striking example of a pop culture mask. All you need is to see his outline. His mask is a symbol, a bit like a skull, or a cross, something that has been forged by society. Those symbols have a lot of strength that one can build upon. Myth as structural law, and everyone can tell his or her own story about it.

**Batman is a superhero. What's heroic about the Black Flamingos?**

They are not heroes at all. And maybe the beauty lies precisely in this contrast. They renounce all this heroism and don't do anything for anyone. They only care about themselves.

**That sounds as if the Black Flamingos were very selfish.**

Absolutely. But they don't hurt anyone.

**Your latest works' titles are „Café Landtmann“ and „Café Zartl“. Well-known Viennese coffee houses. Their real architecture and surroundings stand in stark contrast to your paintings' Alpine landscapes and their guest houses or hunting lodges. It seems very hard to find any parallels. What's the role of coffee houses in your daily life?**

A very important one! When I'm doing office work, I always walk over to a coffee house and have a spritzer.

**What's your favorite coffee house?**

For spritzers I like to go to Café Korb. I often have a schnitzel for lunch there. Or I go to Café Rosi.

**What's the significance of the horses?**

This domesticated animal runs until it drops to the ground... To me, it therefore seems only logical to include it in my work. The representation of a horse adds something heroic and illustrious. It is a good tool, both as working animal and as a representation throughout the history of art: it elevates the figure. The rider appears elevated. He's the boss.

**How would you describe your work process? What's the beginning of a new work or series? Does all development take place on the canvas, or are there concrete themes and ideas that are defined from the beginning?**

By now, there are concrete ideas regarding the finished work, but this has come about in the last 1.5 years. In my old studio, I used to lay out canvas. Then I would throw parties. After three wild days, a certain structure would settle on the canvas. Later it would create a certain space to which figures would be added. Now I work with composition studies and drafts. To give you an example, I went hiking across Steiermark and painted huts, mills, and farm houses. Only afterwards did I approach a larger format. This was an unusually structured way of working for me.

**From an unpredictable moment of chance on a studio floor to a detailed process of planning...**

Leaving things to chance was something that came about under the influence of Hermann Nitsch and the Informell. To me, it was an important process. It allowed me to experiment with materials, structures, and different approaches. These are different methods that I still use today, just that they keep on evolving, and control becomes increasingly important to me.

**In an interview, you referred to yourself as the best contemporary artist in the field of figurative art. How did this come about?**

I'm a great fan of André Butzer's. He named himself the probably world's best abstract painter. His statement referred to a chocolate bar. I was referring to him.

**Are there any influences or criteria that are fundamental to your choice of themes, your work process, or the works themselves?**

Of course. It's something that simply happens. In my case, certain elements of composition keep on recurring. They are obviously important to me. The triangle is one.

**Why the triangle?**

It isn't just an element of composition. It also relates to my childhood and the bible lessons. The triangle as the symbol of the trinity is of course omnipresent.

**Does the triangle then automatically hold a positive connotation for you?**

That depends on how it's used. When pointing downward, it is automatically negative, and vice versa. Other than that, in my works, structure is very important. A work has to be effective from a distance of 20 meters, and every sector has to have the potential of its own image.

**When did you reach the point where you felt that you had found your own language of form?**

I still haven't found it, and I hope that I can continue to develop my language of form. I don't plan to be an artist who keeps on throwing red lines on a black canvas. The process and the step to undertake the next work are a game. What's going to happen today? If nothing happens, then I'm going to go out tonight!