

"Justine Otto: hyder flares"

A display of Justine Otto's work shows the richness of slow-moving schools

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There's a brackishness to Justine Otto's paintings that's immediately apparent from seeing "installation (wohnzimmer)," her wall-sized assembly of paintings at the Goethe Institut. She prefers murky mauves, dreary olives, and grim grays, as the salon-style installation of 33 small paintings shows in a single glance. But for all the painterly heaviness, her exhibition, "hyder flares," is anything but lethargic.



"o.t. (zug)" by Justine Otto (2014)

Otto's palette is one thing that distinguishes this German artist's work from the New Leipzig School, an affiliation of East German figurative painters that includes Neo Rauch, Matthias Weischer, and other luminaries. Those painters tend to favor much more vivid colors. In Otto's "letzter tanz," even the pink nude figures appear to carry a darkness as they dance underneath a starry sky lit up with streaks of peach and purple.

More qualities bind Otto and Rauch et al. than divide them. The New Leipzig School is not so much a movement as it is a historical grouping: Painters in East Germany never abandoned figurative work during the Cold War the way so many post-war artists did in the West. Otto was trained at the Städelschule in Frankfurt (central Germany) and lives in Hamburg (in the north), so she may not identify with the Leipzig artists directly or biographically. But her paintings—which are figurative yet highly expressionist—bear many of the same hallmarks of the post-unification German approach to painting.

There's an atom-age paranoia that hangs over the entire show. Most of the paintings

are based on found photographs. One depicts a woman painting a model of the solar system, an image the artist's gallery (Polarraum in Hamburg) says was drawn from U.S. archival photos of women at work during World War II. Many of Otto's paintings look distressed, as if the viewer is looking back on vintage images. The surrealist paintings comprising "installation (wohnzimmer)" include family portraits and images of animals, depictions of begoggled scientists looming over their experiments, and lots and lots of eyeballs. Big Brother is watching, but also being dissected.

Maybe the least persuasive aspect of Otto's show is its surrealist bent, including a portrait (in the aforementioned installation) of a girl's back and head, which are bisected by a vague blue line (or thread). Narratively, some of these elements are cartoonish distractions. Otto blurs the lines between natural and unnatural much more effectively through brushstroke. There's no better demonstration in the show than a series of six portraits called "o.t." Each of them bears some qualification, as in "o.t. (bubble)," in which a portrait is obscured by marks that could be called bubbles, or "o.t. (loop)," another similar portrait made with loops—and so on. (In German, "o.t." stands for untitled.)

One more factor links Otto and the New Leipzig School: D.C. Bear with me: The Phillips Collection brought Otto to prominence, at least locally, when museum curators selected her as the winner of the 2014 Emerging Artist Prize. That's the best-in-show award for artists participating in the (e)merge Art Fair, which is run by Leigh Conner and Jamie Smith, directors of the Connersmith gallery, and until last year, hosted at the Capitol Skyline Hotel. The hotel's owners, Miami art mavens Don and Mera Rubell, were among the first collectors to popularize the term "New Leipzig School" back in the early 2000s.

Sometimes globalization means that a beat from an Afropunk group in Kenya makes its way into a track by a DJ in Los Angeles almost as soon as it's recorded. But in painting, international movements travel more slowly. In Otto's show, work in the vein of a prominent German figurative style takes on those qualities the absence of which originally defined the school. Otto's work is slow, and all the richer for it.

There isn't going to be a 2015 (e)merge Art Fair: Smith and Conner announced this June that it would return next year at a larger venue. Nor is there a home for "Academy 2015," the annual review of select works by graduate and undergraduate artists in the D.C. and Baltimore area. Smith, the show's founder and curator, could have tapped any number of spaces to host a pop-up installment while Connersmith prepares its new gallery location in Shaw. (In June, it sold its Trinidad space to Capital Fringe.)

Instead, the gallery simply parked its summer school survey online: "Academy 2015" is an exclusively Web-based presentation of photos, videos, paintings, and sculptures. The show includes work by students from all the local biggies—American University, George Washington University, the Corcoran School of the Arts and Design (a GW adjunct), Howard University, the University of Maryland, and Baltimore's

Maryland Institute College of Art. As usual, Smith's picks are all on target. Or so it appears: "Academy 2015" isn't well served by being served up through a server.

I suppose Emilia Pennanen's "Milk and Honey, Saltwater Honey" looks as vivid on a Retina display as it might on a video screen at a gallery. The first part of the split-screen video piece shows a woman dressed in white pouring honey down her throat and into her mouth, while milk streams down from an unseen source onto a nude man. There's a sound element involved—digital static (or maybe ocean waves?) plus vocal chanting in an unfamiliar language—but this diptych would likely work better in an immersive black box than through factory computer speakers or earbuds.

The paintings and drawings in the show—cartoonish oil works by Emma Rose Kennedy and mixed-media hominid portraits by McKinley Wallace III—are rendered as JPEGs. That strips away all the artworks' native information, color, and tactility, and subjects them to an unwanted interpretive layer. Search Google for, say, Klimt's "The Kiss" (in keeping with the whole college sensibility): The range of ochres on display is the best case there is for the primacy of paint over reproduction. There's no way to see it without seeing it.

In the age of Instagram and Tumblr, it's tempting to think photographs might be more amenable to an online-only show. Not so. Nicholena Moon's "Domestic Disturbances," a Gregory Crewdson-esque photo of an open fridge door, measures 20 by 40 inches in person. On my MacBook Air, it's the length of my index finger by the length of my hand. Close observers know how much information is lost in scale (to say nothing of the noise that comes from translating a film print to a digital scan). Arguably, sculptures by Natovian McLeod, Ryan McDonnell, Magali Hébert-Huot, Jenny Wu, Eliot Hicks, and Rob Hackett—among them the strongest works in the show (or so it appears!)—simply cannot be translated into a 2-D format.

Would it be better to have no "Academy" at all? Of course not. Even a curated list of slides delivers a valuable insight about the state of the next generation of D.C. artists. While it isn't a niggling complaint to insist that the work is the work—that the plastic arts are imbued with qualities that have no equivalent in digital formats—it would go too far to say that Smith has done wrong by the audience with this presentation.

It would have been interesting to see a Smith-curated show that included exclusively digital artworks, especially because Smith has a good eye for this kind of work, as shown in previous Academies. In 2015, it's certainly an exhibit that could be fielded from area universities. Chalk it up to an off year: "Academy 2015" is like a trailer for an exhibition no one will ever see. Still, it teases a lot of promise for future shows to come.