

Wall texts

Isa Genzken Meets Liebieghaus

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Liebieghaus Skulpturensammlung

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Isa Genzken is one of the most prominent artists of the present. A selection of works from her multifaceted oeuvre can now be experienced in the Liebieghaus sculpture collection. The exhibition begins with a work series by the artist that makes direct reference to the research and reconstruction activities of the „Liebieghaus Polychromy Research Project“. Since 2003, this project has introduced its decades of research on the original colouration of classical Greek and Roman sculpture to the international public in the travelling exhibition „Gods in Colour“. Individual pages removed from the catalogue to the Berlin presentation of that show served Genzken as working material for the series. The collages testify to her tireless effort to pinpoint and re-examine firmly held, unquestioned beliefs.

Isa Genzken was born in Bad Oldesloe in 1948. She initially studied painting with Almir Mavignier in Hamburg. Following brief studies of art history, philosophy, photography, and graphic art, she continued her artistic training at the art academy of Düsseldorf, where she completed her studies in the master class of Gerhard Richter.

In 2007, Genzken exhibited her art in the German pavilion of the 52nd Venice Biennale. New York's MoMA devoted a comprehensive show to her work in 2013. In 2019, she was awarded the most important international distinction for living sculptors, the "Nasher Prize". Most recently, the Neue Nationalgalerie in Berlin celebrated her 75th birthday in 2023 with an exhibition of 75 works mirroring her entire oeuvre. The same year, a prominent German art magazine dubbed her the most important exponent of the global art world.

Nofretete (2018)

In a large number of works, Isa Genzken has transformed the famous portrait of the Egyptian Queen Nefertiti. Here we see a juxtaposition of two of these works (now in private collections)—a polychromed copy and a white cast of the head. Both wear a pair of modern sunglasses and each forms a unified whole with its X-shaped base.

Discovered by Ludwig Borchardt in 1912, the ancient original consists of a stone core covered with a layer of stucco. Today it is in the holdings of the Neues Museum in Berlin. The portrait of Nefertiti came to light in the studio of an Egyptian sculptor of the 14th century BC, whom it served as a model. The neck and face of the final version (now lost) were made of a valuable hard stone, the crown of wood. The polychromy of the latter consisted solely of glass and precious gems such as lapis lazuli.

Without exception, Egyptian sculptures were polychrome—that is, given a colour finish. In ancient Egypt and ancient Europe alike, a figure lacking polychromy was considered incomplete and ugly.

„ ... That is what I meant when I talked about artists who work according to a principle. How something has to be. I don't really have that all. And I like it that way, actually ... Keep mixing things up!“ (Isa Genzken in conversation with Wolfgang Tillmans)

Untitled (Xantener Knabe) (2015)

The ancient Roman bronze figure of a naked boy once held a tray (now lost) in its outstretched arms. It was discovered in Xanten in 1858 and—like the polychrome portrait of Nefertiti—now belongs to the collection of the Neues Museum in Berlin.

For her artistic appropriation, Genzken used a tinted plaster cast of the figure and poured copper paint onto it in some places. To its head she added headphones connected to a portable CD player. Because she did not put the figure on a pedestal, it encounters the viewer like a real vis-à-vis.

The ancient Greeks and Romans gave their bronze sculptures a polychrome finish. The statics of metal figures permitted outstretched limbs and bold movements in space. The polychromy and the impression of movement together accounted for the works' surprisingly naturalistic appearance. At first sight, many viewers took such a figure to be a living person.

Building on decades of research into the original polychromy of ancient sculptures, Frankfurt's „Liebieghaus Polychromy Research Project“ presents up to fifty scientific reconstructions in a travelling exhibition recently hosted by the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. In this and the following rooms, a number of the reconstructions are juxtaposed with works by Isa Genzken.

Untitled (2016)

To produce a small series of four assemblages, Isa Genzken collaged pages from various publications— a book on the history of ancient sculpture and the Berlin version of the catalogue accompanying the travelling exhibition *Gods in Colour*—with excerpts from texts referring to her own work. She thus contrasted various conceptions of white and polychrome sculpture that have prevailed in the field of archaeology over the decades. One of the texts is about her exhibition *Mach dich hübsch!* presented at the Martin-Gropius-Bau in 2016, among other venues. Undoubtedly not by coincidence, she also used a report on cultural activities in the City of Bremen in 2006 with the descriptive title *To take responsibility means to show one's colours*.

She combined these pages with various kinds of tape (grey duct tape, the brown packing tape of a Cologne art forwarder, etc.), onto which she sprayed a few spots of orange, red, and green paint. Genzken developed this method of combining printed book pages with tape and other materials in 2008/09. It is an extremely fragile working process and as such highly typical of her artistic approach. Another example is the striking assemblage *Wind I (David)* of 2009, on view in the Garden Hall of the nearby Städel Museum.

Schauspieler (2016)

In 2007, Genzken presented her work in the German Pavilion of the Venice Biennale. Her installation, entitled *Oil*, made use of commercially available shop-window mannequins dressed in space suits. These *astronauts* hovered beneath the high ceilings or lay flat on the floor of the exhibition space. Mannequins began to turn up in the artist's work again in 2012. Depicting people in interaction, they are reminiscent of frozen film stills. Now they wear ordinary clothing, in some cases taken from Genzken's own wardrobe. They are also furnished with commonplace everyday objects that appear peculiar, however, in the context of the work.

Along with the *Gods in Colour* collages, the nine *Schauspieler* in the Liebieghaus show were on view in the exhibition *I Love Michael Asher* taking place in Los Angeles in 2016. Genzken thus made reference to one of the pioneers of concept art—Michael Asher (1943– 2012)—and her connection to him. In his work, Asher investigated the dynamic relationship between object, form, and surroundings, while at the same time taking a critical look at the institutional art world.

Flugzeugfenster (Medusa) (2011)

Since 2003, Isa Genzken has been integrating elements of the interior panelling of passenger airplanes in works she calls *Flugzeugfenster*. In airplane construction, these prefabricated elements serve to cover the wall between two windows. Genzken uses them as projection surfaces for introspection.

Presumably in 1597, the artist Caravaggio painted an especially threatening head of the Gorgon Medusa on a round wooden shield now in the collection of the Uffizi in Florence. Genzken's 2011 *Flugzeugfenster (Medusa)* reproduces that painting as a purple-shaded copy, while its form alludes to the rounded shape of airplane windows. In the left-hand window she superimposed the head of Medusa on the face of Leonardo da Vinci's Mona Lisa; at the right, a photo of Genzken herself appears beneath the frightening visage.

According to Greek mythology, the goddess Athena took revenge on the beautiful Gorgon Medusa by transforming her into a monster. After the hero Perseus beheaded the Medusa, Athena mounted the head on her breastplate.

In 2024, the „Liebieghaus Polychromy Research Project“ studied and reconstructed the original polychromy of the Gorgon Medusa. The focus of that undertaking was a large relief of the Gorgon that survived in a Greek tomb in Naples with abundant remnants of its original pigments.

Kai (2000)

Genzken has materialized her fondness for her artist friends in a series of slender steles whose titles are the artists' first names. In addition to works like *Lawrence*, dedicated to the New York concept artist Lawrence Weiner, this group includes *Kai*, the stele on display here. The reference is to her friendship with the painter, video artist, and musician Kai Althoff of Cologne, who now lives in New York. Genzken and Althoff together produced the video entitled *Die kleine Bushaltestelle (Gerüstbau)* screened at the end of this show.

An especially elegant work, *Kai* is reminiscent of the rigorous graphic precision distinguishing the work of Alvin Mavignier, Genzken's teacher in Hamburg and an important exponent of concrete and op art. On the other hand, *Kai* also expresses her deep and avid interest in the history and beauty of Chicago and New York skyscraper architecture. Buildings completed there recently correspond to the proportions of this stele; Central Park Tower, for example, soars high in the sky over Manhattan.

„Because they carry the names of certain people I thought about during my work – Mies or Schindler, names of architects, or Schönberg – I can identify them precisely and know by heart how they look in detail. (...) You could number your pictures like my ex-husband did, but he didn't know by heart which picture went with which number.“ (Isa Genzken in conversation with Diedrich Diederichsen)

Fenster (1990)

It was back in 1975 that Isa Genzken began exploring mathematically calculated forms which she developed on a computer in collaboration with the physicist Ralph Krotz. She printed the resulting ellipsoids and hyperbolas on fanfold paper and later produced them as large wooden sculptures which are exhibited lying or standing on the floor.

In the second half of the 1980s, Genzken turned to new materials such as concrete, steel, and later epoxy resin. She began this new phase with a series of concrete sculptures furnished with radio antennas and generally including the term *Weltempfänger* in their titles. (An example of her *Weltempfänger* is on display near the end of this exhibition.)

In the early 1990s, the artist worked at the Frankfurt Städelschule as a visiting teacher. This engagement was followed by an exhibition of her works at the city's Portikus in the winter of 1992/93. The Portikus had been founded by Kasper König in 1988 and at the time was still housed in a temporary structure behind the Old Library (now the House of Literature). The show, which featured numerous windows cast

in concrete or epoxy resin, was entitled *Everyone Needs at Least One Window* and was also presented in Chicago, Brussels, and Munich.

Untitled (2015)

In the early 2000s, Genzken once again set out on new paths. Now she began using a wide range of everyday materials—including objects purchased in DIY stores or pound shops—which she combined in assemblages. Textiles, cheap tape, mirror foil, and spray paint play an important role in these works, as do plastic casts of elements of famous European sculptures of the past.

Here we see a wooden stele covered in mirror foil and ‘dressed’ in a silk kimono which also partially covers a brass ship propeller resting on the structure’s top. The artist received this propeller when she was awarded the international art prize of the South Korean Yanghyun Foundation in 2009. In the work it is accompanied by two small plastic figures—one of them a girl holding a white rabbit.

„Actually you only think you’re not under any pressure when you make art because there’s nobody telling you what you’re supposed to do. But you have to find everything within yourself and make each decision on your own. And though there’s nobody forcing you to do anything, it can nevertheless turn into a disaster.“ (Isa Genzken in conversation with Diedrich Diederichsen)

Untitled (2006)

In 1977, Klaus Bußmann and Kasper König founded the *Skulptur Projekte* in Münster. When Isa Genzken was asked to participate in 2007, she created a work on the south side of the city’s LiebfrauenÜberwasser Church. It consisted of twelve fragile objects including slightly damaged sunshades, children’s dolls, and other commonplace items.

A year before that installation against the backdrop of a Christian house of worship, the artist made a related work, here on view. It features a baby doll with an oversized matchstick. Paint has been applied to the baby’s face. Both the match and the paint are presumably to be understood as elements of a narrative that, in the broadest sense, bears a relation to the Christian story of the Massacre of the Innocents in Bethlehem.

Weltempfänger ‚Berlin‘ (1991)

In several exhibitions, Isa Genzken has combined her highly sensitive and geometrically complex wooden sculptures—the Hyperbolos and Ellipsoids—with her photographs of magazine ads for stereo sets. When Daniel Buchholz invited her to present recent works in his Cologne gallery in 1987, she chose a nearby music and entertainment electronics shop as an exhibition space instead. She put an entire series of her *Weltempfänger*, made of concrete and industrially manufactured telescope antennas, on display in the shop window.

A world receiver is a radio capable of receiving short-wave broadcasts from all over the world. Because they are reflected by the Earth’s atmosphere, short waves travel around the entire globe. Genzken has a real portable world receiver in her studio, where it accompanies her working process.

„... and (I) called them World Receivers – even though you couldn’t hear anything. I found that aspect pleasantly absurd. (...) My antennas were also meant to be ‘feelers’ – things you stretch out in order to feel something, like the sound of the world and its many tones.“ (Isa Genzken in conversation with Diedrich Diederichsen)

Untitled (4 Türme, 3 Stelen) (2015)

An especially elegant and extensive work by Isa Genzken comprises four towers and three steles. It dates from 2015. In addition to newspaper clippings and a plastic shopping bag from an Indian pharmacy, it

incorporates a plaster copy of a Late Medieval sculpture of a seated Madonna and Child made by Hans Leinberger in ca. 1515. As in the case of the Nefertiti and the Xanten Boy, the original is in the Berlin museum holdings and available as a copy produced by the Berlin Gipsformerei (Plaster Cast Manufactory).

The collection of newspaper clippings is to be understood as political commentary on the part of the artist: *The asocial network*, *Putin attacks*, *The deadly business of the smuggler Mafia*. Above them, she used yellow tape to affix a small photo showing her with Gerhard Richter. The two were married from 1982 to 1993. One of the columns displays several pictures of high-rise buildings. Genzken spent a lot of time in New York and is known for her familiarity with the buildings and their architects. Divided into small squares, the mirror foil on the towers refers to the structures of the skyscrapers' façades.

„I was twenty-one when I first went to New York, and I was so fascinated by the architecture and glad that something like that existed and I was able to have this visual experience that I thought to myself, this is where I want to live. To me New York had a direct link with sculpture – that must have been it.“ (Isa Genzken in conversation with Wolfgang Tillmans)

Wind (D) (2009)

Here Genzken used metal clips to attach semi-transparent fabrics to the upper edge of a high wooden column, to which she also glued images printed on paper. The latter depict faces of cats, space suits, and, in a row of images encircling the column, bacon rinds. On the structure's top is a cast of a pelvis, presumably a fragment of an ancient sculpture (likewise from the Berlin collections?). The artist added a cuddly toy frog to this gilded bum.

Once again we encounter a work by Genzken whose message, however concrete in form, is hard to decipher directly. The artist makes frequent use of architectural elements in her art—for instance columns and steles as bearers of images or texts—and thus continues a millennia-old tradition of humanity.

„Humour, Cupid, love and surprise are the future of modern art. How should I close? Many people are unhappy, and I think that sucks.“ (Isa Genzken in conversation with Diederich Diederichsen)