

FRIEZE

Frieze, Sept. 19, 2024, Krzysztof Kościuczuk

Tobias Spichtig's Vampiric Sitters Draw Us



In his new solo show at Jan Kaps, Cologne, the artist's eerie portraits interrogate capitalist consumption in the digital age.

Speaking to Interview magazine in 2019 about how his brooding sculptural figures formed from resin-soaked clothes ('Geister', 2019–ongoing) had made their way into Balenciaga stores, Swiss-born artist Tobias Spichtig was asked whether he thought galleries and shops were essentially the same. 'Yeah,' he replied, 'except in a store you can't buy the sculptures and in a gallery you can't buy the clothes the gallerist is wearing. But it's the old question of money and art. And I don't think you can have an opinion on money and art because that's like having an opinion on water.'

Working across a variety of media, from painting to sculpture and performance, Spichtig often installs his canvases alongside his three-dimensional works. In addition to the ethereal 'Geister', other installations include clusters of refrigerators, air-conditioning units and mattresses – monuments to planned obsolescence which provide similarly eerie company to his paintings. While Spichtig is eager to share his interests in music, literature, fashion and art, he's as direct as he is opaque. 'I never try to make a joke,' he shares with Purple magazine in 2022. 'I think when things are serious, they have the best humour, in a way.'

Simply titled 'People', Spichtig's most recent exhibition, at Jan Kaps in Cologne, exclusively features portraits. Head Turner (all works 2024) eyes the potential audience through the gallery window. A distorted, elongated face with dark gaping eyes and a nose that morphs into a mouth emerges from a pale background. This character, recurring in the artist's work, seems hardly human. His disconcerting appearance not only resembles the 'typical' alien but also characters spawned in the digital realm, such as Slenderman, who originated in an internet forum, or the reptilian beings impersonating humans to claim global control. No matter their origins, once set loose upon the internet, these are creatures that shapeshift and multiply infinitely.



Tobias Spichtig, *Julian Wadsworth*, 2024, oil on linen, 115 x 80 cm. Courtesy: the artist and Jan Kaps, Cologne; photograph: Marjorie Brunet Plaza

At first glance, Spichtig's characters owe much, in terms of form, to the likes of Bernard Buffet, Amedeo Modigliani or the German expressionists. But, like the digital imagery with which he also engages, those influences are more tangential than blatant. Hanging across the room from *Head Turner* is a portrait of *Julian Wadsworth*, better known as @lilinternet, a versatile personality credited as the initiator of Seapunk – an aquatic-oriented trend, launched on Tumblr, which grew into a subculture. Depicted in a black shirt, a mop of reddish hair surrounding his blank, seemingly absent eyes. Sitting between the two is *Eric D. Clark*, an American musician and a fixture of the Cologne art scene, here in a white tank top and an asymmetrical fringe. Further into the gallery, visitors come across *Sam* and *Carly* in one corner and *Lukas* and *Calla* in another. In 'People' the artist foregoes his usual installations and relies exclusively on the

exhibition space to create encounters between public figures and private individuals.

Regardless of whether they resulted from live portrait sessions or photographs, Spichtig's characters all share a certain vampiric quality, seemingly treading that liminal ground between the living and the dead. 'Capitalism has made vampires of us all,' wrote Elena Filipovic on the occasion of Spichtig's solo exhibition at Kunsthalle Basel earlier this year. Rather like the artist's spectral sculptural works, the protagonists of his portraits – be they known or unknown – are all bound to a world of voracious consumption. That's one good way of looking at those 'People'. And it's a deadly serious joke.