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VALÉRIE FAVRE Galerie Peter Kilchmann, Zurich

Mohamed Bouazizi, Georg Trakl, Sarah Kane, Mark Rothko, Emma Bovary, Ian Curtis. These were some of the names listed in typewritten script on the invitation card. At first glance, there is no logical connection. But what these figures have in common is that they all chose to end their own lives. The motif of suicide thus acted as a prelude to Berlin-based Swiss artist Valérie Favre's solo show, 'Paintings' (her first show in Switzerland in four years and her first at Galerie Peter Kilchmann). Favre is known for her darkly expressive figurative paintings, many of which feature literary motifs woven into an art-historical context. Suicide is a relatively rare subject in the history of fine art, confined mainly to the motif of the virginal Ophelia from Shakespeare's *Hamlet* – who loses her mind and drowns in a river while out picking flowers – which became popular in the mid-19th century (as in John Everett Millais' version from 1852). Later, the motif of the young man who shoots himself became similarly popular (as in Édouard Manet's *Le Suicidé* of 1881), recalling the title character in Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (1774).

Favre's series 'Selbstmord' (Suicide, 2003–13) has been ten years in the making. Based on historical, fictional and famous portrayals of suicide, it focuses exclusively on this still-taboo theme. The series was presented here in its entirety for the first time: more than 100 paintings, all in the same small-scale portrait format, were hung close together on a horizontal band of dark blue. The figurative pictures have a bleached, washed-out quality due to the multiple layers of paint Favre applies as thin glazes. The colour schemes consist mainly of dark tones, occasionally accented by yellow. Red, the colour that stands for blood and death, at least in Western contexts, is not used at all. As a result, an elegiac typology of suicide unfolded before the viewer's eyes, seen as a tragic act but often also capturing morbidly poetic moments. From Cleopatra's snakebite to the suicide pact of Tristan and Isolde, Favre opens up a panopticon of suicide that forces the viewer into a voyeuristic position.

In the second room was *Das Bukett* (*La fragilité des fleurs*), 1–3 (The Bouquet [The Fragility of Flowers], 1–3, all 2012) – large, expressive paintings of flower arrangements. Alongside them, Favre presented smashed then reassembled and painted vases (*Les Petits Reflets du monde*, The Little Reflections of the World, 2006), and several works on paper that include the motif of the flying witches from Francisco Goya's *Las brujas en el aire* (Witches in the Air, 1797). The bouquet paintings and the vase sculptures could be read as both an epilogue to the suicide series and a prologue to the four pictures from the 'Rotkäppchen Zyklus' (Little Red Riding Hood Series, 2012) in the third room, recalling the way the evil wolf persuades the little girl to pick a bunch of flowers. After the oppressive content of the suicide pictures, this arrangement allowed for some comic relief.

The happy ending of 'Little Red Riding Hood,' as it appears in *Grimms' Fairytales* (1812), was added by the Brothers Grimm; in the vernacular tradition, stories like this were usually far crueler. Such shifts and variations between different narrative forms and disciplines – film, literature, painting – are the main focus of Favre's work. In 'Rotkäppchen Zyklus,' the individual parts of the story are arranged on a white background like architectural elements, a structural approach that recalls the psychoanalytical interpretation of fairytales. Although it may seem incongruous here, the series actually rounded off the exhibition and circled back to the suicide theme – especially in light of Freud's interpretation of the story according to his controversial theory of the death drive. In spite of all her mother's warnings, Little Red Riding Hood embraces her inevitable doom (in the original version at least), by hurling herself into the wolf's stomach, making the decision to take the path that leads to death.

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TRANSLATED BY NICHOLAS GRINDELL