

An Interview with Ruprecht von Kaufmann: Painting as if Directing a Movie

CAI contemporaryartissue.com/an-interview-with-ruprecht-von-kaufmann-painting-as-if-directing-a-movie/

By Ruprecht von Kaufmann and Julien Delagrance

February 7, 2021

Painting as if Directing a Movie

Ruprecht von Kaufmann, born in 1974 in Munich, is a contemporary painter living and working in Berlin, Germany. Von Kaufmann achieved international recognition with his figurative body of works, mainly consisting of oil paintings on linoleum and charcoal drawings on paper. The German artist distinguishes himself from the bulk of contemporary figurative painters with his dynamic touch and unique colour palette. Strongly marked by an edge of surrealism and the absurd, von Kaufmann populates interiors and landscapes with figures. Drawing inspiration from daily life as a comment on reality, evoking intriguing narratives and captivating images.

Julien Delagrance (JD): First and foremost, welcome on Contemporary Art Issue. Thank you for taking the time for this interview.

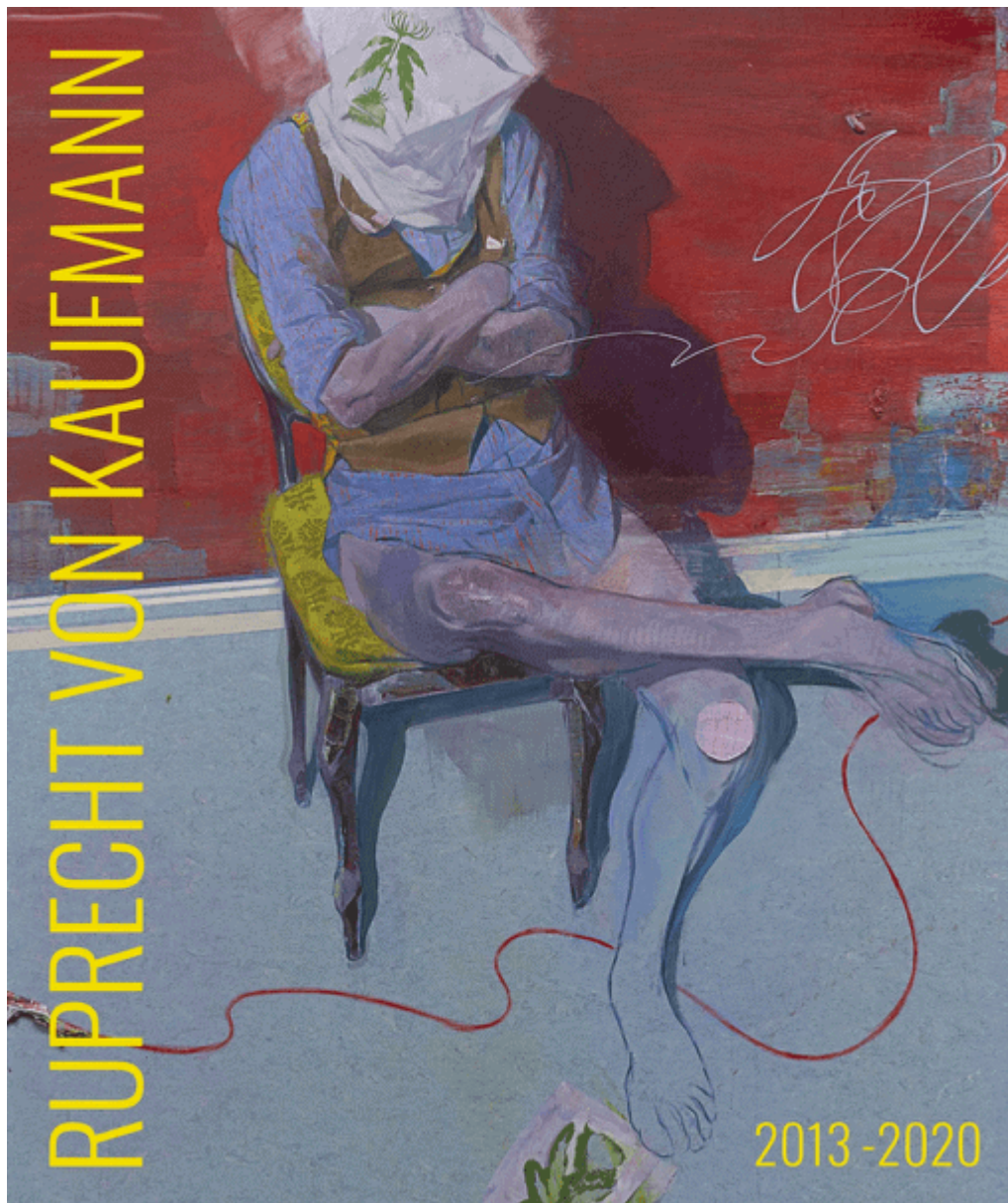
Ruprecht von Kaufmann (RVK): My pleasure!

JD: The only way I can start this conversation is by congratulating you on your most recent monographic publication, *Ruprecht von Kaufmann : 2013 – 2020*. Almost a retrospective in print, a true landmark for any artist. Could you talk us through the catalogue?

RVK: In 2013 I had discovered linoleum for myself as a painting ground. Just before that I had pushed my painting into a new direction, of simplifying the backgrounds and leaving some of the underlying drawing visible in the finished painting. The paintings became rougher and more sketch-like, but at the same time – I felt – more to the point and more impactful. The strange thing about these kind of changes was, that I had been striving to push my work into that kind of direction for a while, and then all of a sudden this door opened and all I needed to do was walk through it.

In 2018 when I first started thinking about a new book, it seemed very important to document these crucial shifts, to give those, for me very pivotal works, a platform. So that's why it has some retrospective qualities. In discussion with my wife – who is incredibly supportive of what I do and who has designed the book – we came up with the idea of not showing the works in chronological order, but to restructure them into overlying themes that tie very different pieces from different years together. Even though the publisher was sceptical at first, I am very happy we went that way. It makes the book more lively and interesting to read. Sylvia Volz did an incredible job with the very difficult task to tie it all together in her text. I think it is a very important invitation into the world the paintings encompass.

The pandemic nearly chocked the project. My gallery – Gallery Thomas Fuchs in Stuttgart – who has co-financed the book was really uncertain if we should go through with it in an unpredictable year like 2020. Fortunately two museums, the city owned Gallery at Gutshaus Steglitz in Berlin and the Buchheim Museum near Munich, offered me solo shows at around the same time, and with that came some financial support from their end. That finally got the project off the ground. A book like this is a collaborative effort, that I couldn't have realised without the support of a holehost of people. Too many to name them all here!



JD: As often, monographs or retrospective shows are key moments for an artist to reflect on their work. Does the monograph have an effect on your artistic practice or direction?

RVK: Not really, to be honest. I have never been much of a looking back kind of guy. It's like mountain climbing. The last climb isn't of any importance. Only the next one counts. For me it's the same with paintings.

And at the same time, yes, a book like this is great, because it reminds you of what you have done with your life for the past couple of years. But for me, changes and the continuous evolving of my work has always been essential. If I would just repeat what I have been doing before, I might as well be working in any other job. What is so fantastic about being an artist, is that every painting wants something different, something new from you.

Today I am forcing myself to make shifts and changes more gradually, because I learned over the years, that collectors and galleries and art critics don't follow along as quickly. You need to give them time to catch on, lead them along with your thinking. Several times, I have lost almost all of my collectors and had to built up a new collector base, because many just didn't like the direction I was taking with my work. That's just part of the job.

JD: The book compiles your work from 2013 up to 2020. Would you say there is a visible development?

Absolutely, I would say so. As I have mentioned before, 2013 brought huge shifts in my work and the first paintings in the book are still painted on canvas. And then you can see the process of how I explored different routes and avenues, that the changes in material and in thinking offered. One of my heroes is Beck (the musician). I love how, with his albums, you never know what you will get in the next one. The only thing you can rely on is that it will be different. So in the book you probably won't read through it and like every painting. But maybe, and hopefully, you will grow to understand and love some of the ones that you didn't connect with at first.

Unfortunately the book doesn't include the smaller works, they often are my experimentation ground and could have filled in some of the steps in between larger works. But it would have gotten too extensive. So maybe there will be another book with just the smaller format works in the future.



Ruprecht von Kaufmann in his studio. Photo: Oliver Mark.

JD: As you have mentioned, sadly, there still is the issue of Covid. How did you experience the pandemic and in what manner did it have effect on you or your works?

RVK: The pandemic has been a mixed experience. Partly, I enjoy the slow pace, because it allowed me to spend more time painting and less time organizing exhibitions. It also has led me to think about other avenues more, like maybe getting back into teaching as well. I love teaching, but it's also such a time drain. But Covid has got me thinking about that again.

Then there are all the concealed shows and the cancelled fairs. I have an exhibition in the City Gallery Gutshaus Steglitz in Berlin right now. But no one can see it. That's a really sad experience. And even though I am used to less social contact than most people, I am starting to feel the strain of social isolation. But I try not to worry too much and focus on what's ahead and how to keep going. So far my galleries have been doing great work to power through the pandemic. But really I am most worried for my kids right now. They have more or less lost an entire year of schooling and of companionship. For them it's been really rough.

All of that might creep into my paintings eventually. It usually takes a little while for current experiences to filter through memory and be reassembled into ideas for paintings.



Ruprecht von Kaufmann, Irrlicht, 2015. Oil, mylar and acrylic on linoleum – 207 x 165 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

JD: A recurring characteristic throughout this body of works of seven years of painting is the implicit absence of faces. Blurred, evaded, hidden, destroyed with a strong impasto or sometimes simply not painted. How did this strategy come about and why?

RVK: I want the people in my paintings not to be a specific person, but a specific type of person. So I am consciously avoiding 'portraits' in my paintings. For me a painting becomes alive through the viewer who encounters the image later on. And for the viewer it becomes possible to make the painting their own if they recognize figures out of their own life experience. So I try to leave the figures as open as possible while being as specific as necessary.

JD: The implementation of this image formula has been increasingly visible over the past two decades. What's your viewing point upon this matter? Why do we feel so strongly not to paint faces and/or view pictures without faces?

RVK: We make connections with another person through the face. We think we can 'read' othersthrough their eyes. We also think that emotions are transported through the expressions on a face. But if those clues are missing, we are being thrown back onto ourselves. We intuitively empathise with emotions that are communicated through posture and body language. This reaction is much more subtle. It's like a riptide that pulls us under and into the painting, when the surface looked harmless and quiet. But then your own emotions that are being triggered. I want the viewer to have a strong emotional response to my paintings.

JD: Does painting itself sometimes demand to blur or hide the faces?

RVK: Blurring or erasing is a regular part of my painting practise. I want the paintings to have a certain rawness and fluidity that would get lost if I laboured too much over a certain section. So I often take a scraper and scratch out hole areas when I feel they have gotten too tight and too precise and then work back into the remnants of what was there before. That process of destroying and rebuilding can go on for quite a while. I want the failures still to be visible. To me the figures look more believable that way, because they are themselves flawed, like actual human beings. But leaving mistakes visible also allows a presence of vulnerability on my end. A true connection is only possible when you allow yourself to be vulnerable. And I want the paintings to connect with their audience.



Ruprecht von Kaufmann, (detail of) Die Sache mit den Sirenen, 2014. Oil and collage on linoleum – 200 x 175 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

JD: As painter, one could argue you are a painter who paints from the heart. What role does intuition have in your creative process?

RVK: Intuition is always a very essential part of the painting process. That's what differentiates painting from conceptual art. The painting process is a continuous series of sometimes incremental decisions. Of course some of these decisions, usually the drastic and more dramatic ones, are well planned and thought out. But to brush over the many, many minor decisions you take without a conscious thought process, would be greatly undervaluing their importance. Like driving a car down a road. Yes you think about it when you need to take a turn. But a large part of the driving process happens subconsciously.

But most importantly, don't underestimate failures and happy mistakes. They can't be calculated and anticipated. But when they happen they sometimes dictate a new direction that you hadn't thought of starting out. Sometimes they crystallize an idea and help you in being more precise. That's what people used to call 'a muse' in the old days, I presume. It can happen that a painting takes control, tells you exactly what it needs. And then it's my role to step back and follow that lead. I find that this usually results in a better painting than I could have hoped for. So it's a process that is just as much intuition as it is planing and conceptual thinking. And experience makes the borders between the two more and more blurry and permeable.

JD: Personally, when I am browsing through your work, what staggers me the most is the immense variety of compositions and figures. Some images seem to go beyond the absurd, depicting scenes that could not even be induced by a feverish dream. Could you tell us a bit more how these compositions and images are built?

RVK: Composition is probably the key. I am obsessed with compositions, they are the backbone of every painting and offer so many possibilities to influence the emotional expression of a painting. It's possible to counter very extreme imagery with a very orderly composition or vice versa. I am always envious of film directors, because they have a timeline, music and sound available to them. So to me it's important to introduce a sense of a before or after into the painting. A strong sense that something must have led up to the depicted moment and that something will happen afterwards. Thinking about my paintings that way opens up so many possibilities of expression to me.



Ruprecht von Kaufmann, *Die Gefährten*, 2015. Oil on linoleum – 207 x 165 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

JD: I can not help but smile when seeing this particular painting, *Die Gefährten – The fellows* in English – from 2015. It looks like a small dinosaur is captured in a morph suit? A fascinating intersection of pure science fiction and a hallucination of some sort. Could you talk us through the process, how the image originated and how one should/could approach this painting?

RVK: There is no right way to approach a painting. It's allowing yourself to buy into the internal logic of the painted world, to dive into the mood. I try with my paintings to generate a 'parallel' reality, that somewhat mirrors our own, but is strange enough to feel unsettling, like how our own behavior might look to someone looking in from the outside. So by allowing yourself to slip into the painting, I hope you come out of it with a slightly altered perspective on your own life. Ideally.

In this painting the main character is the 'monster' lumbering about. I like your description about a dinosaur captured in a morph suit. I was trying to get this creature, that looks sort of cozy and soft and unthreatening, but at the same time feels unnerving, because the shape of the thing is unreadable and obscured. It is at the same time familiar and strangely alien.

Then there are the *Companions* that the painting is named after. The men that are placed in the lockers turning their back to the monster. The inspiration is taken from the *Odyssey*. There – as in many other hero stories – are *Odyssey's* men, who are his faithful companions throughout his adventures. But we never learn their names or anything more about them. They are exchangeable stand-ins, foot soldiers. The 'sideshow-bob' of mythology. Disposables, that you can pull out of the closet, whenever you need someone whom you can turn into a swine.

Even though the painting is kind of dark and moody, it's one that isn't meant to be all serious. Usually there is a lot of humour in my work. So I am glad that it makes you smile.



Ruprecht von Kaufmann, *Der letzte Akt*, 2019. Oil on linoleum on wood – 153 x 184 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

JD: Another characteristic aspect of your oeuvre, offering visual continuity throughout the variety of scenes and compositions, is your colour palette. I note there are many blues, purples, pinks and greens dominating the overall view of your works. They seem to affirm what we're seeing is not reality.

RVK: When I started out in painting, I was very influenced by the old masters. I was using the 'old master style' and therefore my paintings had that coloration and light as well. But I always felt it wasn't quite right. The light didn't look like light looks nowadays, with neon-

lamps and all kinds of colourful light sources. I wanted to have a coloration that feels more as if being under water, or in a badly lit night club or something. Where skin tones don't look healthy and pink, but are dominated by greens and blue. The effect would be exactly that we do not see something real, but what we are seeing is a reflection of reality, that we are moving through some kind of daydream. Like in dreams, things look familiar, and also not at all like in waking life.

JD: One can ascertain a generation of contemporary figurative painters marked by surrealism and a darker atmosphere rooted in existentialism. In my humble opinion you have been one the leading figures for this generation. What's your view on this tendency in contemporary painting?

RVK: Honestly, I am not very firm about 'current tendencies' in contemporary painting. I was always just simply interested in trying to push my work more and more to where I felt it needed to go, to paint the things that go through my head. That has come at the expense of looking too much at what others are doing. That might be arrogant, but for me it's a matter of how to spend my time. I am addicted to painting and I am always thinking about how to get the next creative hit. So there you are. Of course there is no greater compliment for an artist, then to be able to inspire other artists, no greater honour then to be seen as an artist's artist. But that's one of the many things that aren't for me to determine. All I can do is make my work, that's it.



Ruprecht von Kaufmann, Die Rast (nach B.), 2020. Oil on linoleum – 120,5 x 210 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

JD: I think that makes it even more interesting. It seems to be a very unintentional phenomenon when speaking with the artists associated with this tendency. They all seem to be following their own interests and urges, as do you. Are there certain artists, colleagues, with whom you can identify your work with? Has there been a reciprocal influence?

RVK: Of course, I am stealing stuff like crazy. But it's hard to narrow it down to just a few names. And usually I try not to look at the Instagram feed of people whose work I admire too much out of fear to be influenced too much. I adore the work of Lars Elling (b. 1966), Justin Mortimer (b. 1970) and Nicola Samorì (b. 1977) to name just a few.

But even more, inspiration I draw from song lyrics and from books. I love literature and I am addicted to audio books (and coffee to complete the trilogy of my addictions). A good book can trigger a million images in my head, that I can just run with. That's why a lot of my titles are quotes from Song Lyrics or prose. And then of course movies: they have been a huge influence on me. In my head I am directing a film as I paint. There are so many questions that need to be answered in the course of a painting; from composition, to lighting, to time of day, to clothes, colours, backgrounds and how the image will be cropped. All of which influence the final outcome. It is like directing a small movie.

JD: I'll be looking forward for the 'movies' – paintings – you're set to direct in the years to come. Thank you for your time and even more for your genuine and intriguing view on art, painting and life. It has been a true pleasure, Ruprecht von Kaufmann.