

Artforum International (New York)
Published on February 1, 2020 (Print)

BERLIN

Michaela Meise

KM

You never know what you're looking for until you find it. In my case, I found it in the reference to the late-1990s sitcom *Frasier* in the new works by Michaela Meise for this exhibition, titled "Guten Tag" (Good Day). The show began with this greeting and finished with the line that the fictional psychotherapist Dr. Frasier Crane always used at the end of his call-in radio show—GOODNIGHT, SEATTLE AND GOOD MENTAL HEALTH—scrawled across the last of Meise's seven collages on paper or paperboard. The modest display followed the palatable format of a radio show or TV episode: Each collage offered a complete scene, with a central sculpture serving as a kind of running gag tying everything together.

The sculpture was, in fact, made up of two individual works: *Angelus Harpyie*, 2019, a curiously wrought chunk of limestone sitting upon *Eribon-Vanderbilt*, 2017, a simple wooden chair embellished with collage elements. The former, following the prompts of its title, looked like the upper body of an angel or a bird of prey twisting in agony. The work has a spiritual intensity that is at odds with what appeared at first glance to be the levity of Meise's general register or the dry humor in details such as the application for subsidized rent

pasted onto the chair. Throughout "Guten Tag," Meise staged this push and pull between surface and depth to surprising ends. The conjunction of the limestone angel/harpy and the chair suggested that the clash between these two poles produces not a contradiction but a unified whole.

The central conflict throughout *Frasier's* eleven seasons was that the doctor's epically stylish po-mo penthouse was compromised when his dad, a retired police officer, moved in, bringing his worn-out recliner with him. *Guten Tag*, class neurosis! And then there was the endless



slapstick competition between Frasier and his brother, Niles: Hallo, homosexuality! In 2005, Meise and the artist Sergej Jensen made an album of covers of Nico songs. The duo stripped the tracks of their psychedelic glamour to extract from them a more candid essence. With this exhibition, Meise pulled this maneuver in reverse on *Frasier*, or, more specifically, on that series as a farce on popular notions of psychology. Instead of clarifying, she brought the mess of emotional complexity to the surface of the doctor's desperately neat life. In *Two Horsemen*, 2019, figures merge and overlap with other scraps of fabric, sequins, and gouache to form a single plane. A fragment of a pair of jeans lingers unzipped by the mouth of a glittering head. Everything is foreground; neuroses are in bloom!

More often, the artist populates her compositions with distinct human silhouettes, roughly cut from pale cotton fabric, like shadow puppets, only without the shadows. In some, such as *Tram*, 2019, the cutouts propose a kind of staunch stylistic collision, echoing the contrast of the limestone on the wooden chair. Usually a silhouette would indicate an archetype, or a lack of particularity, but the frayed layers of Meise's clay-steeped cotton and gouache defy her cookie-cutter protagonists with their displays of dense subjectivity. Here, character is not found within the outline of a profile, but distributed across the whole picture. In one somehow especially moving work, *Intim* (Intimate), 2019, the all-too-familiar silhouettes of a couple locked in the throes of a Roy Lichtenstein-esque romance have been absorbed by their surroundings, a blush of purple, yellow, and green. Contrary to common understanding, the psyche is perhaps not buried beneath the skin but present in everything around us. And maybe emotions are best understood as what happens when the outside makes its way back in.

—Kristian Vistrup Madsen

Michaela Meise, *Goodnight, Seattle, and good mental health*, 2019, mixed media, 27 1/2 x 39 3/4".