

In Berlin, Autumn's Art Shows Usher in an Anxious Changing of the Seasons

By *Martin Herbert*

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View of the exhibition “The Assault of the Present on the Rest of Time: Artistic Testimonies of War and Repression,” 2023, at the Schinkel Pavillon, Berlin.

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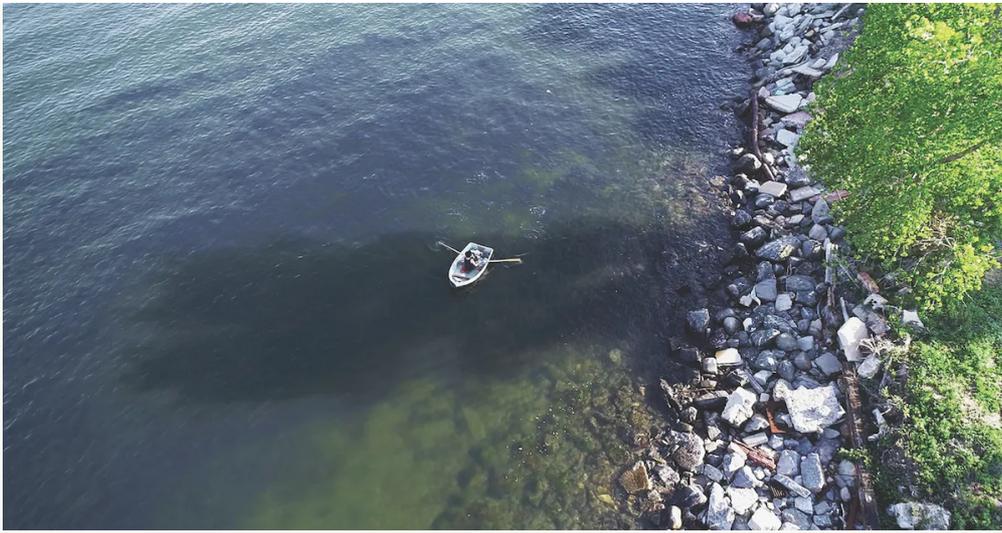
In lieu of a brand-name art fair, Berlin’s contemporary art calendar has focused for the last decade around two seasonal occasions, during which the city’s commercial galleries and institutions cram myriad openings and events (plus a plucky little fair or two) into a short few days. Gallery Weekend Berlin (GWB), the brainchild of a cabal of dealers, has historically been a springtime affair on which institutions naturally piggyback. Berlin ArtWeek (BAW) takes place in the fall, and tends to work the other way around, being a collaboration of major art institutions. This year, however, GWB apparently chose to go

biannual with a Gallery Weekend Festival as part of BAW, placing increased demands on that time frame in September.

But in a week that frequently encourages extreme psychic compartmentalization, feeling pulled in multiple directions is nothing new. Evenings: openings, dinners, late parties, bonhomie, party dress, the usual social minefield. (My bad karma bit me when, on the night I skipped a dinner organized for Paul McCarthy after remembering that one of my reviews, according to his gallery liaison, had “left him depressed for a fortnight,” I imitated a pompous French artist ... who happened to be right behind me.) Days: scrambling from show to show, and stepping from unnervingly unseasonal linen-shirt weather into displays darkly suffused with real-world violence.

“The Assault of the Present on the Rest of Time: Artistic Testimonies of War and Repression,” for example, is a transhistorical exhibition focused on state brutality; it is a collaboration between the Schinkel Pavillon and the Brücke-Museum, which is devoted to artists ostracized by the Nazis. Several such figures’ works stud a show rooted in Germany’s worst hours: Käthe Kollwitz’s 1920s woodcuts and lithos of post-WWI starvelings; Leo Breuer’s deceptively tranquil (if exhausted) watercolors of WWII internment-camp life; Hannah Höch’s unbowed 1941 canvas *Berglandschaft*, in which unnamable lunar flora burst through a ruined concrete landscape. But from there, “The Assault...” rumbles grimly forward through space and time, from Sung Tieu’s *Subtext* (2023), a jittery gathering of Cold War–era surveillance reports and vintage domestic accoutrements like a TV, radio, and typewriter, to Parastou Forouhar’s *Documentation* (1998–), a collection of documents relating to the artist’s ongoing inquiry into the murder of her parents for opposing the political regime in Iran. Also included: Lawrence Abu Hamdan’s *Diary of a Sky* (2023), a video detailing how the presence of drones and fighter jets above Beirut has, as a booklet text neatly puts it, “weaponized the air itself.”

There is no place in this show free, at the very least, from ambient incoming threat, and, as the inclusion of several Ukrainian artists makes clear, our wartime present chimes with and reilluminates the past. In a tiled basement antechamber in the Schinkel Pavillon, Kateryna Lysovenko’s *Waiting Room* (2023) presents paintings of four deceased artists—Elfriede Lohse-Wächtler, Charlotte Salomon, Felix Nussbaum, and Vyacheslav Mashnitsky—as if at 70, an age they never reached. Lysovenko’s work is at once a lament for the killed, an evocation of forced deportation, and an acidic critique of how looking to the future, and ignoring the unhappy present, is mobilized within totalitarian ideologies.



Coco Fusco: *Your Eyes Will Be an Empty Word*, 2021.

KW Institute for Contemporary Art, for its part, offers something equally if differently in-your-face: an overdue first major retrospective for the fearless Cuban American artist/writer Coco Fusco, whose work of the last three decades, presented mostly as videos, photographs, and documentation, is marked by a wide-screen sense of—and determination to expose—humanity’s inhumanity. Consistent across her work is Fusco’s hewing to uncontrolled real-world situations, not metaphor. An examination of colonial and postcolonial exoticization, *Two Undiscovered Amerindians Visit the West* (1992–94) was a series of collaborative performances in which Fusco and Guillermo Gómez-Peña sardonically rebooted the centuries-old colonialist tradition of exhibiting “exotic” peoples in cages (and caught revealingly ignorant responses on video). For *Sudaca Enterprises*, an intervention at the 1997 ARCOmadrid contemporary art fair, Fusco and several others sold T-shirts comparing the fair prices of Latin American art, European art, and the cost of living in Spain as an undocumented Latin American.

The all-too-realistic video *Operation Atropos* (2006) is one of several developed from Fusco’s investigations into the weaponizing of female sexuality in the military interrogation of Muslim men in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Guantánamo Bay; it follows a workshop that Fusco took on surviving the experience of interrogation as a female prisoner of war. More recently, while many artists shied away from direct engagement with the Covid-19 pandemic, Fusco took the opportunity to make *Your Eyes Will Be an Empty Word* (2021), filming herself in a rowboat circling Hart Island, New York City’s potter’s field and America’s largest mass grave, as it filled with pandemic victims. The work addresses collective anxieties in a voiceover, as Fusco casts flowers on the water.

Some commercial galleries, in choosing artists to parade before visiting collectors, haven’t pulled their punches either (or leaned on tried-and-true names). A season highlight is Melvin Edwards’s astringently inventive “B WIRE, BEWARE, ALL WAYS ART” at Galerie Buchholz, which draws from the African American sculptor’s practice from 1970 to the present and—as the title hints—focuses on barbed wire (and chain) while commingling minimalist and readymade aesthetics with strong suggestions of containment and pain. *Now’s the Time* (1970–2023), predating a similar David

Hammons work referencing Charlie Parker, dangles an old saxophone from a chain, segregating it behind a V-shaped barrier of barbwire lines. Set on pedestals at the artist's height, several pieces from this year remake the signature hats from the looted Benin Bronzes in coiled chains. They sit alongside a framed series of mid-'70s semiabstractions on paper, in watercolor, ink, and spray that use more chains as stencils, needling the apolitical niceties of post-painterly abstraction popular at the time.



View of Ragen Moss's exhibition "CONSPIRE," 2023, at Capitain Petzel, Berlin.

In her debut at Capitain Petzel, Ragen Moss projects anxiety into the immediate future in a show titled "C O N S P I R E." Here, seven dangling steel and glass canisters hold flickering flames that collectively bump up the room temperature a fair bit; each of them accompanies one of a constellation of seven hanging polyethylene sculptures, bulbous lightweight obelisks variously decorated with patterns and figurative imagery. One image, a possible clue to the work's latent sociopolitical intent, is a copy of a Käthe Kollwitz drawing. The show, then, feels like both an abstract campfire gathering—a conspiring, indeed, on the part of figures desiring or fearing change—and an unstable situation that might combust, for good or ill, at any moment. Its lack of specificity, and abundance of theatrical nudges, makes the viewer seeking meaning a coconspirator.

Other artists offer similar bellwethers of tipping-point disquiet. At Sprüth Magers, Nora Turato, a rising star who also has a spoken-word installation in the Brücke-Museum show, hangs a tight graphic display of enamel panels against a background of wraparound text; the panels feature Cartesian computer-designed tunnels and abysses that contrast with overlaid typographic snippets of spiraling self-talk: not yourself? what have you done to yourself?, does that make any sense?, how many layers does this onion have? At Heidi, Mimosa Echard's vertical, neo-Funk canvases embed consumer-capitalist detritus into their mottled plastic surfaces—remote controls, kids' toys, pills, kitchen bowls—while larger, gridded horizontal canvases, we're told, use anti-radiation

fabric as their material; they're like fragments of a Faraday cage. The whole, titled *I Think My Cells Are Fucking Behind My Back*, points to attritional attempts to ward off a world full of invasive forces that bypass rationality or control.



Lin May Saeed: *Mureen/Lion School*, 2016.

The show that offers the most relief from all this has, perhaps inevitably, the fewest humans in it: a retrospective for Lin May Saeed at the Georg Kolbe Museum. The German-Iraqi artist, who died at 50 just a couple weeks before the show opened, engaged with interspecies communication and empathy for animals long before it became a contemporary-art staple; she also did so not by lecturing but via a seesawing mix of fairytale charm, humor, mythological learning, and underlying grit. That's clear from this generous presentation of her signature sculptures of autonomous animals and Arab-script-dotted reliefs in carved polystyrene, a pointedly problematic, nonbiodegradable material that is both fragile and built to last. Saeed had an empath's eye for nonhuman facial expressions. Witness the fierce, comical determination of her forward-leaning pangolins, panthers, anteaters, and goats, individual sculptures lined up here as if at the outset of a race. Or see the calm solicitousness of her conversant lionesses in the paradisaical painted relief *Mureen / Lion School* (2016).

Where humans appear, things could go either way. In *St. Jerome and the Lion* (2016), one of Saeed's series of welded metal gates depicting figurative scenes, there's a take on the art historical subject of the saint considerably plucking a thorn from a lion's paw; but in *Toreador Gate* (2019), the gored, innocent-eyed bull is crushing a cylinder-headed, near-abstract bullfighter. If you reach this point after having traversed all the shows mentioned above, humankind going down feels like something of a win.

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