

TEXTE ZUR KUNST

Reviews

Dec 30, 2022

MNEMOSYNE IN NEON

JULIA MODES ABOUT AUSTIN MARTIN WHITE AT GALERIE CAPITAIN PETZEL, BERLIN



"Austin Martin White: Last Dance", Galerie Capitain Petzel, Berlin, 2022, exhibition view

Can colonial violence and contemporary club culture be negotiated under one gallery roof at the same time? With the juxtaposition of two subjects, the combination of which is initially irritating, Austin Martin White's exhibition "The Last Dance" addresses the escapism of the western world, according to the press release. As the art historian Julia Modes remarks in her review of White's solo show in Berlin, the reappraisal of German colonial history only begins hesitantly. In the exhibits, the American artist appropriates the genre of history painting with an innovative technical process that creates metaphorical references to the historical scenes.

The torso of a muscular man clad only in a loincloth is entwined with an overly long snake. The man pulls the animal away with his right hand. His body is dramatically bent backwards so that his head is thrown back and face-to-face with that of the snake. This, however, is not that of an animal, but a human head with a wide open mouth, a pointed nose and a crown. An inscription below the scene in bright orange-red letters anchors the historical reference to which the work owes its title - *In the rubber coils*. Reference is made to a November 28, 1906 in the British satirical magazine *Punch* published cartoon by Edward Linley Sambourne depicting King Leopold II of Belgium as a constrictor to allude to Belgium's violent colonial rule over the Congo.

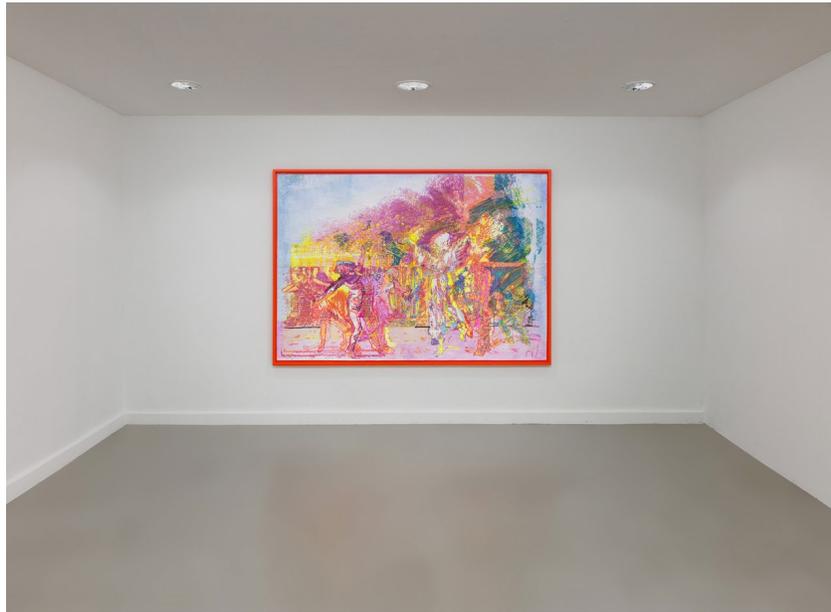
In the rubber coils (2020) marks the beginning of the exhibition "Last Dance" by the American artist Austin Martin White, who was born in 1984, in the gallery Capitain Petzel. The work hangs right at the entrance to the glass cube built in 1964 on Berlin's Karl-Marx-Allee. White not only transferred the motif from paper to canvas and added color to the grisaille. On closer inspection, the complex technique of his paint application becomes clear: pigmented rubber was pressed through a nylon

mesh from behind with the help of stencils, so that small color worms spill out of the picture surface in an even grid and of different lengths. You want to step up and touch the unusual material to see if the fringed color is already dry or if you can smear it like toothpaste.



Austin Martin White, *Untitled (Massacre des Blancs par les Noirs)*, 2020

White's first major solo exhibition is divided into three spatially separated thematic groups. A second painting hangs a few meters from *In the rubber coils* on the light-flooded ground floor, which can be seen through the glass facade from the wide pedestrian walkway. *Untitled (Massacre des Blancs par les Noirs)* (2020) shows the silhouettes of a group of people with black, yellow, red and orange outlines in a tropical landscape on a bordeaux red background; here, too, the lines are made of rubber, which was pressed through a net stretched over a stretcher frame and backed with sackcloth. Reproduced here is an 1833 engraving by Martinet illustrating the slave rebellion in Haiti 40 years earlier. [1] White took over the image composition down to the last detail. While the faces are blurred and difficult to recognize due to his special painting technique, the weapons stand out all the more. Ax and club are raised for the blow; numerous daggers flash, ready to stab. A mood of violence and uneasiness is evoked. The title describes a massacre of historic proportions that became a prime example: the successful slave rebellion that led to the proclamation of the first republic founded by blacks in 1804. Here, the rubber that White chose as a material is no longer directly related to local colonial history, as enslaved people in Haiti mainly grew coffee, cocoa and sugar. Opposite the work *Untitled (Massacre des Blancs par les Noirs)*, on the back wall of the gallery, hangs another picture with clear historical reference; it negotiates the death of Captain James Cook. With their similar coloring, both works form a kind of visual bridge, a passageway that leads to the remaining paintings on the ground floor. Their size of up to four square meters in connection with their thematic setting characterize them as history paintings. The use of rubber in connection with the subject of colonial exploitation expands the genre with material metaphor.



Austin Martin White, *fireatthechurchofclubs (Bye Bye Berghain)*“, 2022

On the lower floor, the exhibits reflect the party atmosphere mentioned in the title. Already from the stairs you can see the work *fireatthechurchofclub (Bye Bye Berghain)*(2022). Within the format of 140 × 203 centimeters, people dance in front of a burning bunker. White used a special painting technique to bring garish colors such as neon yellow, purple and pink onto paper: Using a vinyl cutting machine, the blade of which he replaced with felt-tip pens of different colors, he drew filigree, figurative outlines and the finest ring structures. The mechanical design underpins the allusion to electronic music and, due to its technical scheme, stands in contrast to the ecstatic unleashing of the dancing bodies, which is convincing in terms of motifs and material. However, the combination with the pictures of colonial themes on the ground floor seems macabre at first. This impression of an unfortunate combination of topics is reinforced by the press text written by Lucy Hunter. In the second sentence, Hunter enumerates credit card debt, rent, wildfires, and mass shootings as examples of why "everything is just a little too much," before asking, "What do you do when you feel like your world is going down? You celebrate." It remains unclear what "the euphoria at the end of the story" is supposed to be in view of the historical frame of reference of some works, to what extent White "[misappropriated] colonial tools to design an emancipatory present" or what exactly is meant by the end of the world that has happened several times is. According to Hunter, celebration seems to stand for a suppression of reality. In contrast to the escapism to which club culture is reduced in the press text, the colonial content that deals with the works described at the beginning a lively argument. White supplies the latter on the first floor, whose gallery provides a view of the ground floor.

The works in the *Fordlandia* group of works (2021/22), which are on display on the upper floor, were produced by White using a similar technical process to *fireatthechurchofclubs*. The theme of the series is a city built in the 1920s by the US car manufacturer Henry Ford in the Amazon region of Brazil. A city with a rubber plantation was to be built in the jungle on the Rio Tapajós for the production of car tires. However, the project, which was intended to promote the spread of American values and culture, failed. Not a single car tire was ever made from the rubber grown there. The group of works, which also offers personal points of reference through its connection to White's hometown, the "motor city" Detroit, draws a link back to the material rubber and thematically reflects the zeitgeist. Because Ford's colonial business

strategy has repeatedly attracted attention in the recent past. Greg Grandin wrote the non-fiction book back in 2009 *Fordlandia. The Rise and Fall of Henry Ford's Forgotten Jungle City*. Werner Herzog is currently working on a film adaptation of the book in the form of a fictional series, which is due to appear next year. [2] The Portuguese filmmaker Susana de Sousa Dias took up the story of the Amazon city in her documentary film *Fordlandia Malaise*, which premiered at the Berlinale in 2019. [3]



Austin Martin White, "Ouch! (fordlandia)", 2022

The colonial references on the ground floor of the exhibition also have more reference to Berlin than it first appears: The Congo, which is the subject of the work discussed, was presented to the Belgian King Leopold II as part of the Berlin Conference (1884/85). allocated. Germany's colonial past, on the other hand, has been the subject of restitution in recent years, particularly with regard to the so-called Benin bronzes in the newly opened Humboldt Forum, less than two kilometers west of the gallery. And while the memorial to the German colonial officer Hermann von Wissmann in front of the University of Hamburg was already toppled in the 1960s, the Berliner Strasse named after him was only recently rededicated as Lucy-Lameck-Strasse. [4]The Nobel Prize winner for literature, Abdulrazak Gurnah, addresses this very German colonial past, including Wissmann, in his book *Afterlives*. During White's Berlin exhibition, he was a guest at the House of World Cultures for a discussion and reading of the recently published German translation.

White's work touches upon these recent wounds of the past. They play with references, evoke memories and linger in them. However, this commemorative offer is not only topical and relevant, but also aesthetically original and interesting. Technically, White explores the material limits of painting with his mechanical processes, expands the classic genre of history painting and thus opens up new approaches to familiar themes. If one puts White's exhibition "Last Dance" with the title of the feature film *Tanz auf dem Vulkan* produced by Hans Steinhoff in 1938 in relation, it acquires a new logic. The phrase "Nous

dansons sur un volcan" (We dance on a volcano) coined by the French statesman Narcisse-Achille de Salvandy in 1830, in the year of the July Revolution in France, stands in the light of political upheavals. [5] Heinrich Heine took up the saying in his *Lutetia* reports in 1842 and added: "We are dancing on a volcano here – but we are dancing." [6] In White's exhibition "Last Dance" things are bubbling above ground, socio-political upheavals are taking place already anticipating the cultural discourse in which they stand. As is so often the case, there is dancing in the basement.

"Austin Martin White: Last Dance", Galerie Capitain Petzel, Berlin, September 16 to October 16, 2022.

Julia Modes is an art historian and is doing her doctorate at the Humboldt University in Berlin and the Université de Fribourg on violence in Cy Twombly's oeuvre.

Image credit: © Austin Martin White, courtesy of Capitain Petzel, photos Gunter Lepkowski

REMARKS

- [1] Abel Joseph Hugo, *France Militaire. Histoire des Armées Françaises de Terre et de Mer de 1792 à 1833*, vol. I, Paris 1833, n.p.
- [2] Oliver Kaever, "Fordlandia. Werner Herzog wants to shoot his first series", in: *Spiegel Online*, 06/15/2018.
- [3] web link .
- [4] The Tanzanian politician Lucy Selina Lameck Somi campaigned all her life against German colonial rule over Tanzania.
- [5] Franz Lipperheide, *dictionary of sayings*, Berlin 1907, p. 844.
- [6] Heinrich Heine, "Lutetia, XLII", February 7, 1842, in: *Heinrich Heine. Historical-critical complete edition of the works*, ed. by Manfred Windfuhr, Hamburg 1988, p. 154.