

ARTFORUM

Jutta Koether BORTOLAMI

The paintings in "Fortune," Jutta Koether's cogent show at Bortolami, were hung flush against the gallery walls and lit from above. For audiences familiar with the German artist's practice, such an arrangement is enough to warrant an exclamation point, or at least a parenthetical gasp. That's how strongly this relatively conventional hang runs counter to Koether's installations of the past several years, in which paintings were suspended from the ceiling, placed against glass panels, positioned on angled partitions and columns, and illuminated by whatever natural light the gallery could muster. Staid though it may have been, the straightforward presentation at Bortolami shifted the focus from how we look to what we see, and it released Koether's paintings from their common status as props for performances and placeholders for ideas. That she didn't completely forgo past gimmicks—the painting



Jutta Koether.
*Caterham Kobayashi
Crash Balthus St.
Firmin, 2015*, oil on
canvas, 87 × 67".

Kobayashi Crash Balthus St. Firmin, the highlight of the exhibition, a decapitated Saint Firmin cradles his head at his chest. The circles of his closed eyelids echo laterally across the canvas, in everything from a spiraling rotorelief to floating balls and breasts to the splayed tires of a crashed car, and they bounced from painting to painting as suns and pearls and force fields, as jet engines and wheels and apples and yet more balls. Amid the sickly sweet pink and orange palette, the metallic swirls, and the hurried brushwork, the figure of Saint Firmin stiffly announces the gravity of Koether's sense of painting: The head, removed from the body, is still bound to it; concept cannot be severed from gesture.

Koether drives the point home in her artist's statement (and in a different version of this text published in English in *Texte zur Kunst* in June, just before the show closed), when she quotes Pierre Klossowski—idiosyncratic Nietzsche scholar, elder brother of Balthus, and a painter himself—invoking the vicious circle between action and idea and between painting's history and its possibilities: "Each thought should be considered a gesture." This well-turned phrase, however, is not found in the standard English version of Klossowski's major text on Nietzsche. The closest we come to the sentiment is when Klossowski quotes the philosopher himself, but with an important inversion: "Every movement should be conceived as a gesture, a kind of language in which (impulsive) forces make themselves heard." It is action that is conceived as language, as thought. The slippage within the quotation is crucial to Koether's practice and to "Fortune" in particular. For Klossowski, as for Koether, it is the exchange and interpretation of gestures, and their requisite misprisions, that make thinking possible.

—Rachel Churner

at the gallery's entrance was unlit, for example, in a move she alludes to in her artist's statement as "a calling card"—only reinforced the strength of the change.

Not all of the paintings were strong enough to stand alone: With its fist-pumping version of the Vitruvian man balancing atop a fallen figure, *Formula Won Balthus* (all works 2015), the painting in the dim foyer, seemed more comfortable in the shadows, and two accounts of Her Majesty the Queen meeting Angelina Jolie—their elongated hands joining beneath the narrowing arcs of an Internet-connection symbol in both single-panel and diptych renditions—were mercifully isolated in the second room. But the three stunners in the main gallery hung at ease "in the company of 'light fall,'" as Koether describes it, and with one another. In *Caterham*