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Artist / City, Jutta Koether / Philadelphia, Bortolami Gallery



Hans-Jörg Mayer. *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly*. 1991.

"I never looked at painting as some masterful thing one would want to reinstall, but instead as a platform, a potential, an island, a lifeboat, a discipline to negotiate life . . . a performance."

Jutta Koether with Benjamin Buchloch, *October*, 2016

History permeates everything.

In 1991, the German photographer Hans-Jörg Mayer shot a photograph, *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly* (1991). It seemed to parody a 1973 photograph of the Symbionese Liberation Army, an extreme left-wing terrorist organization based in California. Mayer's image was of five exceptionally talented—brilliant, actually—radicals, all women who were actively part of the artistic and social networks of Cologne in the 1980s and 1990s. These renegades—Charline von Heyl, Michaela Eichwald, Jutta Koether, Cosima von Bonin and Isabelle Graw—were all "mugging as gun-toting militants." The artist who occupied the center of the photograph was the 27-year-old artist-musician Jutta Koether. Her hair braided under a bandana and a cap, Koether—like her faux co-revolutionaries—holds a semi-automatic rifle, a long gun for a well-armed late 20th century woman. All of these artists (and Graw, the art historian critic) challenged—then and now—the male-dominated canon of art history.



Jutta Koether. (l) *Serinette*. 2017. (r) *Volume 1, 2, 3*. 2001/2002.

Koether was already part of New Wave and punk culture since she studied at the University of Cologne, beginning in 1977. Like her gifted comrades, she has diligently produced truly individual, authentic art. Each of these women has established careers and reputations in Europe, but they are less well known in the United States. Koether and von Heyl—both of whom live between New York and Germany—are well known and well established among the cultural cognoscenti and have gradually built commercial audiences. It is now that both Koether and von Heyl are gaining more visibility particularly in European museum venues. Koether's work is currently on view in a mid-career retrospective, *Tour de Madame*, at the Museum Brandhorst (Munich). It will then be presented at Mudam Luxembourg, Musée d'Art Moderne Grand-Duc Jean (Luxembourg) in early 2019. *Tour de Madame* features more than 150 paintings that reach back to her beginnings in the neo-expressionistic context in Cologne and, more specifically, her subsequent exploration of the color red as an expressive device, responding to a cliché of male painters.

After moving to New York in the early 1990s, Koether made a large painting titled *Inside Job*, which she placed on a West Village apartment floor. She had a few small rooms there—one with a desk, one with the painting—and asked people to come and look at this work in progress and discuss with her the experience of seeing the painting. The next day, she would type a report of the artist-viewer encounter, almost like an analyst's transcript, which was added to the guest book. Thea Westreich, the advisor-collector, would recall that you could sometimes see Koether making work in the back room of "Scorched Earth" (the name of this particular project). Her painting practice, along with performance, was always there. From 1991 to 1999, Koether exhibited with the Pat Hearn Gallery. But when Hearn succumbed to liver cancer in 2000, Koether recalled, "the whole gallery environment wasn't stable enough to carry on with me. It sort of crashed, for me." Thereafter she engaged in a variety of open collaborations with artists like Steven Parrino that broke her dependence on traditional galleries. Her career moved forward in different, sometimes unconventional ways, and it became more European focused.

In the 2000s, Koether's approach became increasingly more complex as it gathered both information and physical material, resulting in inky black canvases and assemblage paintings. Her use of traditional art materials is mixed with the unconventional: resin (or liquid glass) and Canal Street bric-a-brac. Koether's work requires an adjustment in how we encounter and apprehend art generally and painting specifically. She herself struggles with painting since she never formally studied it.

"I never went to an academy. I studied it [painting] in relation to philosophy or to pedagogy or in relation to my activity as a music journalist . . . When it comes to painting, I'm almost like a dilettante, a self-learned person, and this sometimes also causes destabilization and trouble... Because if you don't have academic training, you try to invent something, you teach yourself. You arrive at things that might not be "correct" but that are somehow interesting." (*Roleplaying: A conversation with Jutta Koether* by Fanny Benichou, Émilie Bujès & Aurélien Gamboni Forde, August 2007)

Now, in Philadelphia, Koether's work is being exhibited in a three-part, year-long occupation and performance of sorts. Her work is installed in a "trinity house," one of the small three-story homes that once housed the working and servant classes of Philadelphia's more affluent areas in the 18th and 19th centuries. The house is an architectural typology specific to the city, referring not only to the three-levels of the house, but also to the Catholic trinity of "Father, Son and Holy Spirit." Characteristically, trinity houses have one room per floor which are joined by a small spiral staircase. This project is clearly mirroring Koether's 1992 performance in the New York apartment, "Scorched Earth": one room, one painting and one desk.

The entire year-long program is designed to present an overview of Koether's artistic output in the United States. Rather than an artistic project, Koether refers to it as an "external research site," using works from private collections and from her own archive. *Trinity: Past* (January 14 – April 7, 2018) featured her red and representational works, including paintings that spanned 23 years, referencing art and art history from Botticelli to Poussin, from Watteau to Cézanne. The motifs on three floors are the ones that have populated her paintings with a non-hierarchical, if not an indifferent, approach to materials. (See: <http://bortolamigallery.com/artistcities/jutta-koether-philadelphia/>.) *Trinity: Present* (April 28 – September 9, 2018) is a survey of her black paintings made between 2001 and the present: ranging from glassy to inky, leaning towards an almost manic abstraction. Perhaps most importantly, the black works underscore "a porous relationship between painting and music, with aesthetic concerns seeping through both of her artistic outputs." *Trinity: Future* (September 16 – December 15, 2018) is yet to be unveiled.

As innovative as Koether herself, Bortolami Gallery initiated a series of roving year-long exhibitions in different cities across the country in 2015. Artist/City is an experimental programming initiative that pairs an artist with an American city. Taking place in unconventional settings for longer durations than the standard gallery exhibition, these site-responsive projects grant artists freedom to present their work according to their own creative vision. Bortolami's programming initiative has presented Daniel Buren/Miami (2015-2016), Eric Wesley/St. Louis (2016-2017), Tom Burr/New Haven (2017), and now Koether.

Jutta Koether / Philadelphia

1637 Rodman Street, Philadelphia, PA, through December 15, 2018. Saturdays, 12–6 pm and by appointment

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