



REVIEW - 21 AUG 2017

# Birgit Megerle

Kunsthhaus Glarus, Switzerland

BY DANIEL HORN

Safely nestled in the staid basement of the bucolic, modernist Kunsthhaus Glarus, and shielded by the glass of a vitrine, are two small black and white photographs of the artist Merlin Carpenter. These belong to Birgit Megerle's 'Vitrinen' series (2007-15), which chronicles her social and artistic milieu during those years. Shot from above, lying down and wearing one of Megerle's intricately painted garments, Carpenter's blond wavy hair and meditative, mildly content expression lend soft support to the various roles assumed: muse, living canvas and critical dandy.



Birgit Megerle, 'The Painted Veil', 2017, installation view, Kunsthaus Glarus. Courtesy: the artist, Galerie Neu, Berlin; Galerie Emanuel Layr, Vienna/Rome; Galleria Fonti, Naples; photograph: Gunnar Meier

In 'The Painted Veil', Megerle's solo debut in Switzerland, one such dress (*Untitled*, 2010) was displayed hovering mid-air, attached to a suspended fabric piece that doubled as a sensuous room divider in dusky pinks and grey (*Untitled*, 2015). The hanging elegantly underscores the artist's casual command of material as much as her avant-garde concept of painting as a practice that spills into and enwraps the utilitarian. 'There is no outside of value,' claimed Carpenter in 2013, 'only a virtual trance-like status [...] what we have traditionally called the left imaginary, the non- or anti-capitalist.' Megerle's works, whether depicting artist-friends, stars, politicians or the unidentified, hinge on this catch-22 of imagining an 'outside' of value verging on an escapist formalism. This occupational hazard is characteristic of a specific artistic axis encompassing Cologne, New York and Berlin, within which her practice reverberates, as well as the erstwhile Akademie Isotrop, an informal art school in Hamburg of which she was a co-founder.

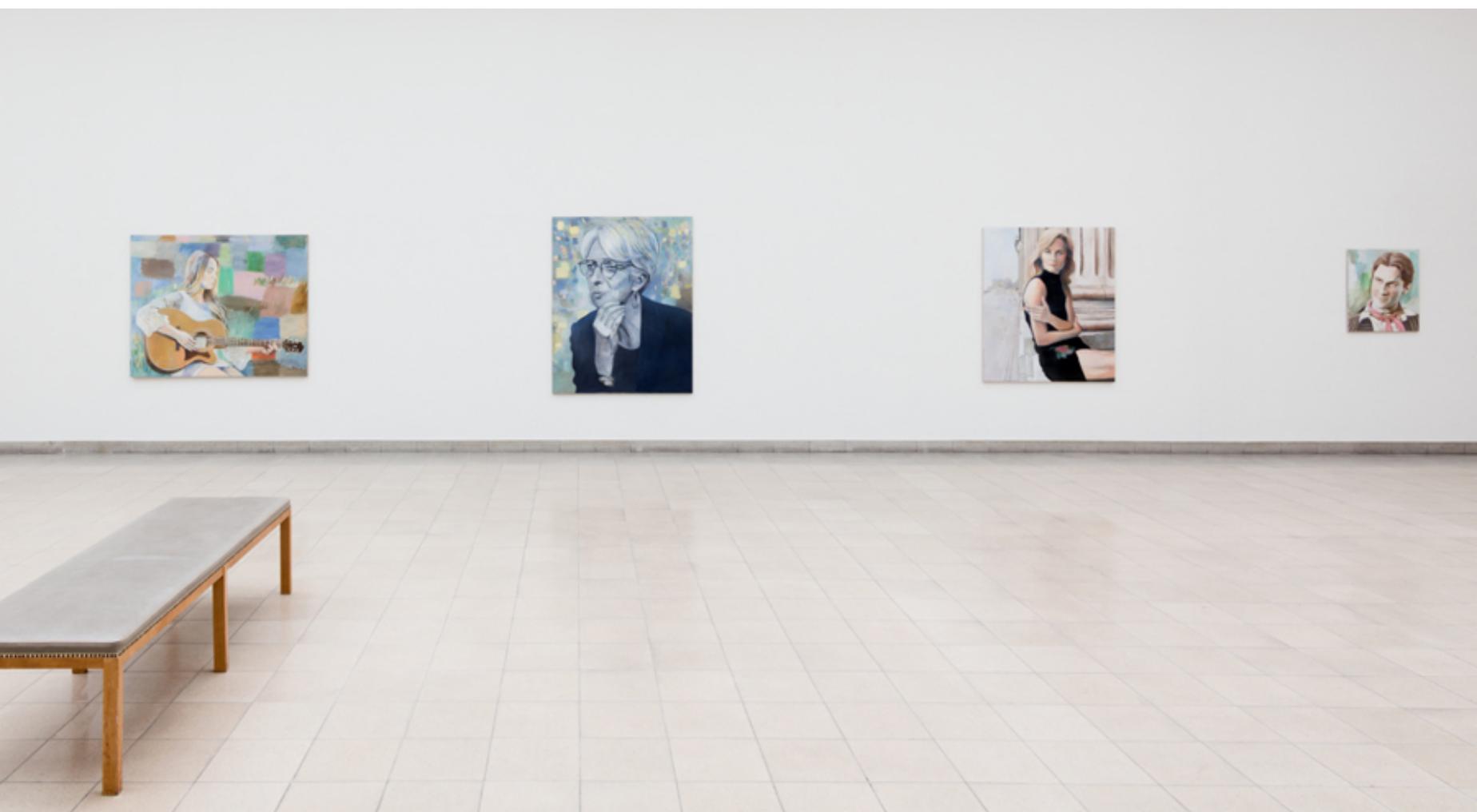


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This legacy of self-organization and transatlantic collaboration continues to inform her paintings on display in Glarus. The works on view are as candy-coloured as they are serotonin-depleted. Yet, these works do not merely speak of coming-of-age but of prevailing cooperation. *Backdrop for New Theater I* (2015), for example, is a flamboyant, naïve-style composition blending domestic and tropical foliage. A Venetian or South German Alemannic carnival mask sits atop the work's background intimation of colour field painting and references the New Theater: a shuttered, quickly historicized, expatriate, artist-run space in Berlin in which the work once served as a backdrop for the space's final play. Re-hung here, the piece (now part of a private collection) performs as both a reification of cross-generational affinities and as a legitimizing

gesture by a dynamic forerunner in bohemian entrepreneurship.

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Megerle's new works in Glarus noticeably eschew a portrayal of a selectively coded and valorized art-world cohort in favour of public-realm figures and intriguing strangers. This choice has the effect of rerouting any default classification of her as an artist working in a tradition of 'networked' painting, the self-reflexive painting after Martin Kippenberger that was codified in the 2000s by art theorists Isabelle Graw and David Joselit. Pictured here instead are female figures such as the director of the IMF Christine Lagarde (*Living Currencies*, 2015), actresses Catherine Deneuve (*Rhapsody*, 2016) and Charlotte Rampling (*Gaze I and II*, 2015) and French caricaturist *Claire Bretécher* (2015), whose 1970s comics included the cartoon series 'The Frustrated' and a character named Cellulite. Withered, the real-world figures in Megerle's paintings are bound together by a residual, Francophile glamour that the artist seems hesitant – or disinterested – to currently transfer to her art-world fellows. Portraits from 2017, meanwhile, feature male protagonists, such as a young Christian Bale in jaunty fin-de-siècle garb (*Bale*, 2017). Hamburg's counter-cultural poet-turned-libertine ethnographer Hubert Fichte (*Fichte*, 2017) makes an appearance, resembling a young Charles Manson and rendered in a rugged, burnt sienna palette. A young, pretty female from 2017, by contrast, is anonymized, simply titled *Tramp*. Whether she is a carefree runaway living on food stamps or a trust-funded millennial, the painting won't tell.

Main image: Birgit Megerle, *The Painted Veil*, 2017, installation view, Kunsthaus Glarus. Courtesy: Kunthaus Glarus; photograph: Photo:

Gunnar Meier

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