

## Folio, avril 2019

The work of Austrian painter Bernhard Buhmann is grounded in sociology, theatricality, and colour, but his latest exhibition at Carbon 12 sees a rejig of his perspective in more ways than one. With the initial idea to describe society in relation to increasingly relevant and ingrained technologies such as artificial intelligence and bio-tech, Buhmann indicates he was searching for a language to express this new reality. Settling on a fusion of two schools of painting—his medium of choice that he engages with classical methodology—Buhmann bridges portraiture and abstraction, maximising on the dynamic tension of using an old medium to describe contemporary society. Informed by an awareness, and fear, of growing public uncertainty—politically or otherwise—as much as by literature he’s read over the last two years, Buhmann remarks that this overall lack of clarity is exacerbated by technology’s hyper-speed and accessibility.



“The world is now a village in a way,” he says. “It impacts your daily life.” Buhmann references the arcade game Pac-Man, a technology he grew up with, as a brief tangential reference and starting point. “Pac-Man was interesting because it was one of the first examples of A.I. in that you couldn’t predict the behaviour of the ghost characters,” he explains. “It’s a good metaphor for contemporary society.” The conceptual footwork for *The Chaser*, *The Ambusher* and *The Fickle* does not immediately gel with the aesthetic, which despite at first glance reading vivid, abstract and busy, is not overwhelming. Produced with traditional means, Buhmann intuitively applied colour to canvases, and gradually shaped the components through layering and restructuring. From a distance, the paintings appear machine-made in their precision, but closer inspection reveals traces of his hand and the construction. “I don’t want to make graphic designs—it’s still painting,” he asserts. “It’s about the process of painting on a formal level.” Numerous subtleties resonate throughout the works, referencing society, technology and traditional portraiture, which Buhmann combines with his specific brand of imaginative, playful, and mysterious expression. While earlier series were

defined by complex scenarios and environments dotted with characters (The Post-Machines, 2013-14), his artistic development through series like The Pretenders (2014) and Modern Times (2017) has seen consistent use of vivid colour, patterning, and dense composition, while exploring more abstract execution, resulting in works such as today's The Fickle (2019). A lengthier absorption of this new series — with a helpful nudge from Pac Man — sees the abstract works turn familiar, reading face-like, albeit more akin to sophisticated versions of child-drawn 'potato head' people (Sisters of Mercy, 20

Though this is technically Buhmann's first exhibition without figures, what we see when the swathes and gradients of blues, pinks, greens (and more) begin to co-exist as a whole is unmistakably figurative—and a deft maneuvering of the dichotomous schools of figuration and abstraction. "I had these portrait galleries in mind with people on the walls," he remarks. "The works have an art historical reference, and have the scheme of a portrait, with the proportions of where the eyes, hair, nose, even the feet at the bottom, should be." The two-meter canvases are human-scaled, and Buhmann explains that the 'potato head' quality is intentional: "Kopffuessler, it's a German word for the primitive drawings of children where they draw a head-like figure with only feet, which is a stage in development where they are very focused on their own worlds before becoming more aware of the world around them." Figures represent despite wild simplification—readable as a tamed cacophony rather than reductionist revamp—and it seems that Buhmann is now going micro instead of macro. With the conceptual rooting and Buhmann's visual interpretation beginning to dialogue, the shift from a more expected approach to sociological observations—figures and elements existing 'big picture' in relation to another—towards a more singular, introspective take devoid of external stimuli is logical. It resonates with a reality that is moving increasingly towards states of closeness and internalisation due to device reliance—what Buhmann referred to as that "small village". Conversely, however, he adds that in such circumstances, there seems to be a 'need' to stand out. "The paintings are colourful because it's a sign of our times and how we try to create attention by being 'colourful', or loud," he notes. More than representing the status quo, Buhmann's works are imbued with formal and conceptual dynamism that bring the works to life while subtly and interpretatively adhering to academic and art historical canons. Works like The Gossiper and Two Princes (both 2018) are electric but balanced, perhaps mirroring society's ability to adapt and form manageable rhythms in an age of technological noise. "That's why I never use colour straight from the paint tube," adds Buhmann of his painterly translation. "It'd be totally chaotic." Rather, The Chaser, The Ambusher and the Fickle seems to have found harmony and a way to appease complex and shifting realities in life and in painting. "Maybe it's also a way for me to get things straight for myself," he adds as a final note. "To have to just face it.