

Art in America

WERNER BÜTTNER Marlborough Chelsea



Werner Büttner:
The Tears of Xerxes,
2016, oil on canvas,
59 by 47¼ inches;
at Marlborough
Chelsea.

In his 2015 collage *The Humorlessness of Historians Spawns Further Monsters . . .*, German artist Werner Büttner frames a bust of Janus, the Roman god of beginnings and endings, within an inky black void; the god's two faces look forward and backward in time as what looks like an explosion of stars showers upon him. Büttner's exhibition of seventeen paintings and fifty-five collages (all but one work 2015 or 2016) was overflowing with allusions, symbols, and enigmatic juxtapositions—like Magritte, Büttner is a capable painter whose work poses challenges less painterly than syntactic—and while viewing this modestly scaled composition I apprehended a unifying framework for the many words and pictures in dialogue around me.

The collage brought to mind Herodotus—one of history's least reliable historians, but also one of its most expansive. Herodotus has often been compared to Janus, due to his position as a transitional figure (located between the mythical and the rational) and his holistic view of history. His work was associative, open-ended, narrative-driven, attuned to the divine, the comical, and the cyclical—qualities that also run through Büttner's work. In Büttner's painting *The Tears of Xerxes* (2016), a bluish white orchid floats atop a mottled ochre background. Waves crest below, and red bloodlike streaks run down from the orchid's center. Büttner explains in the exhibition catalogue that the Persian king Xerxes once wept to think that none of his soldiers would be alive in another hundred years—and then sent them off to die the next morning. "The tears of Xerxes," Büttner writes, "are the strangest tears in the history of the world." The episode is probably apocryphal. But like Herodotus, who wrote about it nearly twenty-five centuries ago, Büttner knows that some absurd human truths can be conveyed only by a good tale, however tall.

In the painting *Joie de Vivre* (2015), three monks play volleyball, one of them appearing to be punching another; a separate

collage shows that the subject was taken from a photograph. The facts behind the original image hardly matter; the emergent narrative is the important thing. On canvas, the image affirms an overarching proposition in Büttner's work: that appreciating history's absurdities may be among our few buffers against its endless, violent repetitions.

The paintings are much larger than the collages, their brushwork soft and confident, their palettes unified by a preponderance of ghostly blue, white, and ochre. Like Martin Kippenberger, a fellow member of the *Neue Wilde* group that surfaced in Germany in the late 1970s, Büttner makes paintings that crackle with earthy, cynical wit. Faint spatters of white on each—the press material describes them as "ejaculatory"—evoke a unifying life force. Pyramids, swastikas, and other ancient, loaded symbols loom.

As does, always, Büttner's sense of the absurd. In *Symbol with Periorbital Hematoma* (2016) the familiar all-seeing Eye of Providence has a black eye. In *Super Rigid Composition* (2015), a wiener dog, head erect, stands opposite a plate of sausages; behind, an empty coat rack: "Et voilà," Büttner writes in the catalogue, "a masterpiece." In *The Confetti of Duration* (2016) a string of sausages tumbles from a pipe before a building with darkened windows. The painting's precise meaning is hard to guess, but Büttner's notes suggest a kind of exasperated nihilism seeking refuge in absurdity. "Life's a goddamn waste, its duration sometimes longer and sometimes shorter," he writes. "You have certain expectations, you get a few sausages, and you have to stomach a whole load of Hard Edge and Color Field painting."

—Austin Considine