

## *A crocodile swimming in deep water.*

“Something in the Water” Group Exhibition at wildpalms gallery (April 15, 2026)

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“Something in the Water” is a group exhibition co-curated by Andreas Steinbrecher that presents new trends in contemporary German painting, featuring works by Haein Choi, Lucas Kaiser, Hanna Kuster, Paul DD Smith, and Andreas Steinbrecher.

A year ago, our *Quo Vadis Malerei* discussion series, serving as the closing event for the *Ruf der Trompeten* exhibition, offered an open space for dialog where opinions, perspectives, and questions regarding the current state of painting in Düsseldorf were articulated. This commitment to fostering exchange among artists, gallery owners, collectors, theorists, and the public proved not only relevant but necessary.

Within the Kunstakademie Düsseldorf, with approximately 500 to 600 students, the painting class remains the largest. However, a clear contemporary understanding of what constitutes painting today is still lacking. It was precisely this absence that became the common thread of the panel: the urgency of interrogating painting in the present.

Our upcoming exhibition series seeks to stimulate this discussion. In this first exhibition, we propose to explore a shift between past and present pictorial practices, focusing on a transformation of composition.

In art theory, composition refers to the way a painting is structured and organized, encompassing both the final result and its creative process: the arrangement of colors and forms on the surface, the distribution of elements within the depicted space, their formal and thematic relationships, and the very act through which the artist constructs the image. Throughout history, this concept has been a constant field of dispute regarding what defines the pictorial; in other words, what makes a painting effective or relevant.<sup>1</sup>

About a decade ago, composition was strongly marked by an ahistorical abstraction, akin to the formalism championed by Clement Greenberg in the postwar period.<sup>2</sup> The canvas became the sole medium on which artistic strategies were executed, the aim of which was to subordinate the decorative function of the painting—inherent to its existence as a cultural device—to visual drama. A stroke of spray paint could be applied directly onto the surface, cutting across it as was the practice of the formalist “zombies”; or the canvas became the stained and discolored print area of a malfunctioning giant printer. These gestures acquired meaning, in many cases, through the transformation of the linguistic sign into a token: a visual unit that was available, interchangeable, and operative—as in

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<sup>1</sup>Pfisterer, Ulrich, Hrsg. Metzler Lexikon Kunstwissenschaft: Ideen, Methoden, Begriffe. Sonderausgabe. 2. Aufl. Stuttgart: J.B. Metzler, 2019

<sup>2</sup>Clement Greenberg, “The Crisis of the Easel Picture,” 1948, PDF, <http://michaelorourke.com/PrattCourses/common/Readings/Modernism/G>

Wade Guyton’s example of the “X”.<sup>3</sup>

These modes of producing abstract composition also aligned with an art market geared toward accelerating the transfer between the primary and secondary markets—finding effective allies in rapid execution, the tokenization of the sign, and ahistorical formalism.

Currently, however, there is a renewed emphasis on drawing as a compositional structure, both in the preliminary stage and in the final execution. The sketch takes on a central role: artists no longer work exclusively on the canvas in a quest for immediacy, but instead introduce slower, more deliberate, and reflective processes. This deceleration allows for greater coherence between drawing and painting, which in other periods of pictorial production had remained separate.

In Lucas Kaiser’s work, drawing determines the compositional order and guides the search for techniques that allow lines to be translated into the pictorial space without loss in translation. It is striking how ornamental patterns—a delicate leitmotif in his work—retain their linear quality in the painting.

In Haein Choi’s work, drawings of urban landscapes function as autonomous units that condense a nostalgic distance, equally present in her canvases. Hanna Kuster, for her part, amplifies details to monumental dimensions, generating compositions that envelop the viewer in an almost dizzying dynamic; in her drawings, however, she abruptly alters the scale, placing the observer in the position of a voyeur of the everyday.

Andreas Steinbrecher, whose initial training is in graphic design, incorporates drawing in a unique way into his pictorial practice. At times, drawing remains visible as a material—for example, in graphite on canvas in his series of automobiles—pointing to an isomorphism between the industrial design of the automobile and the childlike gesture of drawing machines. At other times, drawing recedes into the sketch, yet continues to determine the pictorial plane, in a manner analogous to architectural plans.

The reintroduction of drawing into the composition also implies a technical exploration of the gesture and the development of new palettes, moving away from the monotony of color directly squeezed from the tube. Steinbrecher has noted how the pictorial surface here takes on the character of a warm membrane, operating in a haptic rather than exclusively visual manner. This quality depends as much on the gesture as on the use of color, which even opens up to soft or pastel tones.

To the extent that different sensory modalities—sight and touch—are activated, drawing also introduces new bodily dynamics into the production process<sup>4</sup>. In contrast to the immediacy of working

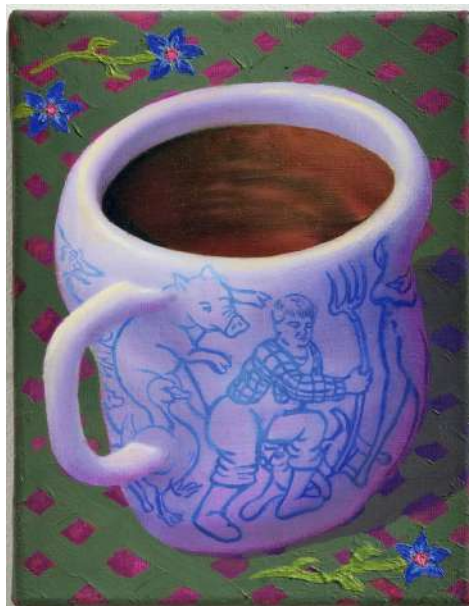


Figure 1: Lucas Kaiser, Farmers Mug, Oil on canvas 2026, 20 x 15 cm

<sup>3</sup>Chris Wiley, “The Toxic Legacy of Zombie Formalism, Part 1: How an Unhinged Economy Spawned a New World of Debt Aesthetics,” Artnet News, July 25, 2018, <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/history-zombie-formalism-1318352>.

<sup>4</sup>Yve-Alain Bois: What’s with the bamboo stick? Matisse’s late drawing practice. Camberwell College of Arts.

directly on the canvas, more controlled gestures emerge in the transition between sketch and painting, or amplified movements that respond to the demands of the format.

As drawing has altered the composition, it becomes a narrative: a narrative built upon processes of collecting, classifying, and editing images—everyday and popular; iconographic; and also of dreamlike origin—in an affirmation of the power of the imagination. The methods of collection and montage combine digital and analog procedures. All images are arranged on the same plane of visual equivalence: none prevails over another.

Paul DD Smith takes us to a contemporary world still populated by forms from the past, expressed in the beauty of the vermicular: in a building’s frieze, in a jug, in an ornamental motif. These formal remnants allow the sign to be repositioned within the painting without fixing it to a single hierarchy: the sign shifts, is rearticulated, and retains historical echoes while acquiring new compositional functions.



Figure 2: Fig. 1–2 — Left: Paul DD Smith, Bubble Tile (The Modern Biclops), glazed ceramics, 2025 Right: Adolph Menzel. Detail. The Iron Rolling Mill (Modern Cyclopes), 1875. Creative Commons

from a figuration reduced to the biographical. In recent years, certain discourses—though legitimate in their motivations—have tended to crystallize into repetitive visual formulas, generating, in some cases, echo dynamics in which painting becomes subordinated to the reiteration of standardized identities or narratives.<sup>5</sup>

In this sense, the transformation of composition does not respond to a simple substitution of one formal regime for another, but rather to a historical reconfiguration of what painting can make visible and, in a certain way, tangible. As Rosalind Krauss has suggested, the autonomy of the medium is never a natural condition, but rather a critical construction; therefore, rather than seeking a lost purity, perhaps painting today is defined by its capacity to articulate relationships, shifts, and new specificities between drawing, surface, narration, and gesture.

Likewise, Andreas Steinbrecher synthesizes historical compositions and formats in several works: in his *Ararat* series, for example, he engages in a dialogue with Hans Holbein’s *Toter Christus im Grab*, transposing the figure into a new pictorial context.

Drawing and narration become interdependent: one cannot exist without the other. This relationship allows for the construction of a deeply rooted narrative that distances itself

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Camberwell College of Arts. YouTube channel. <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCr9GjTiGwHH4DR-SgbrU1Ow>.  
<sup>5</sup>Dean Kissick, “The Painted Protest: How Politics Destroyed Contemporary Art,” *Harper’s Magazine*, December 2024, <https://harpers.org/archive/2024/12/the-painted-protest-dean-kissick-contemporary-art/>. yorku



Figure 3: Hanna Kuster, Champignons, Äpfel, Bohnen, Acryl on paper, 150 x 200 cm, 2025



Figure 4: Haien Choi, Untitled 006 (Security Posts), Acrylics on paper, 21 x 29,7 cm



Figure 5: Andreas Steinbrecher, Ararat VIII, Oil on Cotton 150 x 35 cm, 2026



Figure 6: Hans Holbein, The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb, Oil in Panel, 200 x 30 cm, 1520/22. Creative Commons