

Vera Palme, *Diversion*

22 March – 25 May 2025

Diversion is the name of a new series of paintings that Vera Palme has made for this show. All the same format, made up of tight ringlets in different shades of green, each work bears a more or less recognizable arrow. The arrows, in as far as their – more or less recognizable – form can still direct, point this way or that and without pointing to anything specific. Altogether, they are rather unhinged. *Diversion (green olive)* is already quite dependent on *Diversion (green 1)*, *Diversion (green peach)* and the other *Diversions* to be pointing at all. Of course one wants the arrow, the symbol of indication per se, to point to something. And if not the arrow, then the painting. Preferably it suggests a forward rather than a backward motion. Not to mention restlessly going around in circles.

Like many others, I worry about painting. At the same time, I am over worrying about painting. Painting, we all know by now, dies hard. Despite being slandered as self-involved, as having too big an ego, but also for being submissive, it remains resilient. It never quite ceases to outdo itself and continues to feed a belief that this medium in particular can harbour sublime qualities – awe, romance, beauty, truth, fear. Not “only” that: Often painting will confront the viewer with a set of qualities that act as an expression of a contemporary order, be that one of ‘icons’, ‘networks’ or ‘products’. Vera Palme’s work takes a whole load of such qualities, spreads them out on a canvas in layers and layers of references – in motif, colour, technique, format, hanging, in short in nearly all the ways that still define painting as painting – and detaches. She too is undecided, or rather decidedly undecided. Palme sets up her paintings for disappointment: longing and projection onto a subject crumble as we realize it is already unravelled, has been painted unravelling. Often, she paints to simultaneously define and dissolve the outlines of her subjects. What the painting is supposed to do, what we expect it to do, is – finally – no longer what it actually can do. There is a certain relief in this. Rather than being grand, Palme’s paintings are unresolved. They seem to auto-operate in order to perform what we mistakenly perceive as their vitality but what is in fact our own madness.

Some references her paintings exorcise are the brown of Rembrandt, Gothic Fiction and its

successors such as the pulp novel, the conjurer in Bosch, a landscape seen from a Roman balcony, and the act of copying as such. Course open brushstrokes in some; small, thickly applied swirls in others; pasty layers appearing as if aged in others again. But then they are often a bit awkward towards their idols – too long, too scrappy, wonky and raw. They are, they want to be, inadequate: material lacks tension, composition is overstretched. The ego architecture of these paintings has broken down, and they become echoes of what they were, what they wanted to be. They are in a state of ruin. Such intentional failure is a logical and possible answer to painting’s dominance. It is also a complicated intention bearing the weight of a political reality in which some are allowed to fail and are even glorified when they do so, and others are not. These are not arbitrary problems removed from the world: painting is (still) a symbol of tradition, the “conservative” medium that embodies calls for the autonomy of the arts vs. “political” or “effective” art. Understandable. It was not so long ago that painting had different motivations. Palme exploits this strange discourse of opposition with more uncertain feelings. The past intrudes upon the present, reminders of the “previously thriving” genre now facing a fear of its own phantoms. Painting’s plight is her romantic temperament, latching on to things that get in her own way.

“I want to believe.” Two paintings, with this slogan below a UFO, are based on a poster hanging in the office of Fox Mulder, the agent from the cult 1990s TV series *The X-Files*.

One is a painted replica of the poster, the other is its abstraction as a monochrome. What are we believing in here exactly? The aliens, the TV series, the painting of the poster in the TV series, or the painting of the painting of the poster? It doesn’t say ‘I believe’, it says ‘I *want* to believe’ – pointing to doubt, but also pointing to a will to commit to fiction, be this because of an appreciation of its joys and its thrills or an investment in it as a coping mechanism. Desperately clinging on to the possibility of revelation, the only thing for it is to keep spinning more of the same stories. These may twist and turn just enough for us to trick ourselves into continuing the narrative, but that doesn’t necessarily make for a better text. Spiralling narratives uphold

belief, wishful thinking can remain, and a painting can nourish these fantasies, even when in full realization of this rather exhausting mechanism.

The conjurer never gives away his clever secrets and tricks. *Ohne Titel (Der Gaukler)* does: What was a table by Hieronymus Bosch allows the audience to see it for what it really is – the second face of the two-faced trickster, framed and obvious, the illusion revealed. A perfect killjoy. Getting behind the workings of the work is Palme's signature move. Actually, this is wrong. It's not about getting behind the workings but rather staying put in them. An illusion locked in the illusion, a tale in a tale, even when the secret is lifted, is still fiction, though perhaps one to a more claustrophobic effect.

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Vera Palme (*1983, lives and works in Frankfurt am Main) has had solo exhibitions at Galerie Buchholz, Berlin; Bizarro, Copenhagen and New Toni, Berlin. Group shows include Halle für Kunst, Lüneburg; Kölnischer Kunstverein; Biennale für Freiburg 2; Haus am Waldsee, Berlin and Kunsthalle Bern. In 2020, she received the Karl Schmidt-Rottluff Stipendium, among others and in 2023, she self-published *Nuts*, a collection of short writings.

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