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Konrad Lueg

NEW YORK,
at Greene Naftali

by Courtney Fiske

Konrad Lueg: *Towel*,
1965, casein on canvas,
78¾ by 57¼ inches; at
Greene Naftali.



From 1963 to 1967, Konrad Fischer, Düsseldorf art dealer and main European conduit for New York's neo-avant-garde, moonlighted as the artist Konrad Lueg. For five fleet years, his project, together with those of art-school friends Gerhard Richter and Sigmar Polke, helped establish a German analogue to American Pop. The result, cheekily dubbed Capitalist Realism, countered the Eastern Bloc's socialist variety. Both styles figured art as economically determined. Yet, while Soviet artists did so by fiat, Lueg and his peers depicted "reality" with a smirk. Their work's critical edge came through a hyperbolic enactment of capitalist codes; like Pop art, their project negotiated a tenuous line between ironic distance and cloying complicity.

This compact survey, Lueg's first stateside show since 1999, bolstered his claim to being more than simply an aborted Business Artist turned businessman. The 28 works on view—a mix of medium-scale paintings, plastic-wrapped frames, and photo collages—attest to the conceptual sophistication underlying his abstract idiom.

The mid-1960s found West Germany still riding its postwar boom: the *Wirtschaftswunder*, or economic miracle, that ushered in an ascendance of consumerism and middlebrow taste. Modernism's heroic claims were newly bunk, and painting was in crisis, everywhere questioned, abandoned for experimental media or made the photograph's accessory. The seven of Lueg's "pattern paintings" on view, each an iteration of vegetal or biomorphic motifs in casein tempera, offered one possibility for a medium at the point of

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historical exhaustion. The works each affect a gloomy cheerfulness, their Technicolor spreads at once lurid and sullen, like postscripts to a sugar binge.

Abjuring the tensed lines of Piet Mondrian for the organic contours of Jean Arp, Lueg's geometries solicit the body: the slanted tulips of *Washcloth* (1965) could just as well be sperm. Though serial, his patterns occasionally fail to fill the canvas, as if cut from a larger whole. Their color is readymade and exaggerated: shrill neons, synthetic greens and syrupy pinks that might otherwise suffuse a snow cone. Saturated hues were the vogue of 1960s German interior design; casein, tellingly, is a standard binder for wall paint. Lueg's paintings turn on this tension between high-modernist abstraction and home decor.

In *Towel* (1965), brushed curves of red, green and blue overlay highlighter-yellow areas produced with an embossed roller. On a primed canvas ground, the neon fronds produce an Op-like flicker, while the juxtaposition of different shades of white—here brilliant, there dulled—unsettles the surface. In other works, Lueg ups the stakes by puncturing the canvas. A tapered hole replaces the facial features on the silhouetted head depicted in *Untitled (Head with Red Hair)*, 1963. The figure's nimbus of red hair pushes forward while the painting's cobalt ground recedes, producing an illusion of depth radically undercut by the hole, which reveals the canvas as so much stretched cloth.

Composition of 7 Planes (1966) takes this spatial ambiguity to its endpoint: objecthood. In the array of seven square frames, each rotated 45 degrees and covered with a plastic cabinet liner, figure and ground are coincident. Yet, rather than yielding a utopian outcome, as in Mondrian's vision of a unified plane, the squares empty into kitsch objects. One sports a De Stijl scheme; another presents in glossy International Klein Blue. Through Lueg's intervention, modernist style reveals its decorative subconscious. Wouldn't a Mondrian or a monochrome just look so nice above the sofa?

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