

Room 2-4: Karin Kneffel. Face of a Woman, Head of a Child

Introduction

Monumental paintings with picture-filling, ripe apples and grapes have made Karin Kneffel internationally famous. At the Franz Gertsch Museum, the German artist is presenting her new series of Madonnas, which deal with the religiously and art-historically charged theme in a modern and complex way. Other works are dedicated to Jesus and Joseph, fruit, candles and fire.

Monumental paintings dominated by ripe apples and grapes (which were already on display at the Museum Franz Gertsch during a presentation of the collection in 2013/14) brought Karin Kneffel international fame. More than presentations of mere fruit, they are frugal temptations and bewitchments. Her approachable works speak to viewers on an intuitive level and evoke symbolic associations of seduction and fecundity. Defined by clear messages, strong colours, and extreme realism, Karin Kneffel's pictures have allowed her to become one of the most successful and independent contemporary artists in Europe.

The Burgdorf exhibition was curated by Anna Wesle in collaboration with the artist. We would like to thank Elsy Lahner (curator and author of the exhibition texts) and the Albertina, Vienna for their excellent cooperation and support in conjunction with this cooperative project.

After the initial showing at the Museum Kurhaus Kleve (2023/24), Karin Kneffel's new series of works will be on display in Burgdorf. Created in isolation during the years of the Covid pandemic,

these pieces now await their first museum presentations. Preceded only by a few exceptions, this is Karin Kneffel's first thematic exploration of the human image. She created paintings of uniquely polychromed 15th- and 16th-century statues of the Virgin Mary she found at home and abroad, mainly in Italy and Romania. Without exception, her representations focus on the figures' faces and heads. Her new works are conceived as diptychs with the countenance of the Virgin and the head and bust of the appendant Infant Jesus. An array of connections between the seemingly sculpted faces becomes apparent: the ecstasy or also rapture of the Virgins as they look down at the Infant Jesus with a gaze that reflects not only their role as the Mother of God but also compassion and mercy in light of their child's fate. The infants, in turn, express childish mirth, loving devotion, or prophetic foresight. Karin Kneffel's new group of works featuring Virgin Marys presents a modern, complex exploration of this both religiously and art historically charged subject.

This central group is supplemented with other works by the artist, thereby infusing the presentation with seemingly religious, but also existential components. We thus find pictures of fruit, but also of figures of Jesus, candles, fire, drops, and more. For the first time, Kneffel's depictions of Joseph will be on display. She says she chose the subject, not because of the Christian connotations, but because he "brought up an illegitimate child".

Born in Marl (DE) in 1957, Karin Kneffel lives and works in Düsseldorf. Before turning to visual art,

she studied German philology and philosophy in Münster and Duisburg-Essen, where she acquired the thematic equipment to create her complex pictorial worlds. She then went on to study at the Düsseldorf Art Academy with Johannes Brus and Norbert Tadeusz. Kneffel concluded her studies as a master student with Gerhard Richter, whose motifs she copied as fragments or referenced with art historical expertise. Early on, the artist received awards and distinctions, such as the Lingert Art Prize and a scholarship from the Villa Massimo in Rome. She has taught at a range of institutions including the Iceland Academy of the Arts in Reykjavik, Iceland, the University of the Arts in Bremen, and the Academy of Fine Arts Munich.

An exhibition by the Museum Kurhaus Kleve – Ewald Mataré Collection, Kleve (DE) in cooperation with the Museum Franz Gertsch, Burgdorf (CH). The show was curated by Valentina Vlašić and Anna Wesle in collaboration with the artist.

The exhibition is organised under the patronage of the Ambassador of the Federal Republic of Germany to Switzerland and Liechtenstein, H.E. Michael Flügger.

Supported by SCHÖNEWALD, Düsseldorf.

In the film room, three contributions on Karin Kneffel can be seen.

(text: Museum Kurhaus Kleve – Ewald Mataré-Collection, Kleve, Germany / Museum Franz Gertsch, Burgdorf, Switzerland)

Room 2-4: Karin Kneffel. Face of a Woman, Head of a Child

About the works on display

We claim that contemplating a work by Karin Kneffel makes one happy. The artist, who lives and works in Dusseldorf, allows herself to paint “beautifully”, attaching great importance to the smoothed, perfected surface of her oil paintings. Her motifs seduce and speak directly to the viewer: ripe apples and bunches of grapes, sensual drops of water on panes of glass, atmospheric candle paintings, velvety textiles and fascinating fire and, for a few years now, mother-and-child figures. At first, there is a sense of wonder and awe. How can one paint like that? Then the eye begins to wander, penetrating into the depths of the depiction, recognising overlapping planes and following the motifs. The search begins for the truth of the picture, which was initially perceived as absolute. As fleeting as happiness is, so fleeting is the truth of Karin Kneffel’s paintings. The illusion of a perfect representation of reality dissolves in the mentally stimulating effort to make sense of what is depicted. What exactly do we see, and what is it trying to tell us?

In a current series of works begun in 2021, Karin Kneffel portrays women and children. The title of this publication and exhibition is **Face of a Woman, Head of a Child**. Ulrich Wilmes, who wrote the first text for these new works, describes the diptychs as “mothers with boys”. At

the beginning of our remarks, we spoke of “mother-and-child figures”, which is a little more precise. In fact, for years now, the artist, who was raised and socialised as a Catholic but does not live the faith, has been collecting photographs of the Virgin Mother and Jesus figures from the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. She finds them in churches at home and abroad, especially in Italy and Romania. It is not the well-known, grand works of art that interest her, nor the ritualised actions associated with them. Kneffel sees these figures as sculptures of individuals, thinks about who might have modelled them, and notices strong family resemblances between mother and son that cannot be attributed solely to the sculptor’s personal style. Transformed into paintings – more than **twenty-three different diptychs** have since been created – the portraits still reveal their origins in the polychromed wooden sculptures, but the artist has breathed a little life into them. The faces of the mothers are greatly enlarged and cropped in the medium format of 120 × 100 centimetres; in contrast, the children’s heads are depicted in full, along with a part of the bust. Our gaze glides over the marble-like surfaces of the skin, over rounded cheeks, snub noses, upturned lips, soft chins and flabby upper arms, and is caught by the coils of the earlobes and the locks of hair. The figures gaze in different directions; there is no direct eye contact between mother and child. We also find it difficult to make

contact with the figures; the eyes are stylised, and their gaze, mostly vacant, is directed into the distance. A curious impression sets in: of looking at figures coupled with the simultaneous feeling of “Yes, that’s what a child actually looks like”. One might also indulge in an amused smile at the thought that while these duos have been “beautifully painted”, they are not necessarily “beautiful” in the classical sense – but that is precisely what makes them charming and individual. Some of the children also seem to have aged before their time, already carrying the wisdom of the world within them.

In the series of diptychs, there is an astonishing **duo of Joseph and the Child Jesus** (2023). A young foster-father, with brown hair, full beard and a melancholy gaze, is portrayed here with his adopted son. Kneffel found this combination so rare and inspiring that this diptych – after a statue in the Chiesa del Carmine in Perugia, which was exhibited in the cathedral in 2021 on the occasion of the special “Year of St Joseph” proclaimed by Pope Francis – will probably remain the artist’s only diptych on the subject. It is, however, an important reminder that, as a rule, a child has two parents and that there can also be an intense relationship between father and son.

Room 2-4: Karin Kneffel. Face of a Woman, Head of a Child

Kneffel's preoccupation with the mothers and boys, and finally also with the father in question, Joseph – whom she also painted as an older man with a white beard in a single portrait (2023) – led the artist to feel the need to paint **more portraits**, this time of people. Three diptychs depict real faces and heads in the same format and detail as the portraits of the sculptures. The first of these (2021), is of a young woman from the artist's family circle and her daughter in a modern bodysuit with an open snap. For the second duo, painted in the same year (2021, not exhibited), Karin Kneffel used older photographs: she painted herself as a thirty-year-old mother next to her son as a toddler. In the third diptych (2023), we see Kneffel's now grown-up, bearded son with his daughter; the artist thus also realised a father-daughter combination.

The **Child Jesus**, his white teeth gleaming between red lips, holds a bitten apple in his left hand, the red bowl matching the boy's flushed cheeks. This detail, together with the exhibition at the Museum Frieder Burda in 2019/20, where the artist revisited her earlier fruit paintings from the 1990s, inspired her to return to the **theme of fruits**. A direct comparison reveals a development in her treatment of the subject: while the earlier fruit paintings were characterised by a cool precision in the execution of the fruit in the foreground and an often neutral

monochrome background (some, however, were also backed by a thicket of leaves, a cultivated landscape or a cloudy sky), the new paintings depict fruit that appears even more sensual against atmospheric backgrounds. In the large format on view (2022), measuring 200 × 180 centimetres, the branch with six juicy red **apples** and green leaves is set against a stormy grey sky, with drops of water falling from the fruit. Nearly identical in format, the **grapes painting** (2022) also features an atmospheric sky over treetops in the background. The grapes are coloured by a surreal lighting atmosphere of light blue (upper third) and orange-red (lower two-thirds). Another monumental grape painting (2021), measuring 180 × 270 centimetres, cannot be clearly interpreted. What do we see behind the extremely realistic grapes hanging in the foreground? Is it a seascape with a horizon and a cloudy sky, or a heavenly sea of clouds? The truth of the grapes, which seem to jump out at us at first glance – so real! – becomes a complete invention: the illusion is revealed. In an interview, Karin Kneffel explained: "You recognise a lot of things in my paintings at first glance. But what happens when the shifts become apparent? What's going on? Where are we? Nothing is as it is. That is what I mean. Fact is transformed into illusion. [...] By that I don't mean to cast doubt on the value of truth per se, [...]. What I question is faith in absolute truths and values."

For all their perfection, for all their realism, Karin Kneffel's paintings are, of course, inventions; they are compositions worked out in detail and meticulously executed in oil on canvas. Favoured set pieces and motifs are also reused and appear in ever new combinations – for example, the **depiction of Jesus as a boy** (2022), whose motif Kneffel discovered as a clay statuette in a display case in the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna. In the sculpture, as well as in the painting it inspired, the boy holds a large fig and a bunch of grapes in his hands, which the artist had already painted several times before. The landscape in the background contrasts with the pedestal on which the boy stands, as well as with the foreground of the picture. The latter gives the impression that one is looking through a fogged-up window on which someone has drawn with their finger. There are similarities with the composition of another depiction of Jesus as a child (2022) – here, too, Kneffel has replaced the single grape and bunch of grapes held by the figure in the Bayerisches Nationalmuseum in Munich (p. 113, fig. B) with her own constructions.

Two series are worth considering here in conclusion: the early **fire paintings** from the 1990s and the **candle paintings** from 2016 to 2018. The compilation of works selected for this exhibition and publication evokes a variety of associations that can quickly lead into the realm of the

Room 2-4: Karin Kneffel. Face of a Woman, Head of a Child

religious, as well as of the existential. Apples, for example, are symbolic of Adam and Eve in Paradise and of original sin; grapes call to mind wine as the Blood of Christ in the Christian liturgy; and Mary, Joseph and Jesus are a reminder of salvation through the death of Jesus, “the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world”. The pictorial elements of earth, water, air and fire refer to the four basic elements, and in this context, **the illusionistically painted staircase** of a harem in Istanbul (2003) recalls a Jacob’s ladder leading to higher spheres. A religious interpretation, however, would not aptly characterise Karin Kneffel’s art; it is rather the case that these central elements flow into her work from the Christian- influenced art-historical tradition, from our socialisation and our cultural area. One could, however, certainly say that Karin Kneffel addresses existential themes and questions with these series – in the sense that we are dealing here with birth, growth, fertility and transience: in short, with life and death. In this reading, we have now arrived at death with the candle and fire paintings (progressing chronologically backwards according to the date of execution).

The series of **candle paintings** in the format of 100 × 100 centimetres (2016–2018) was created in the context of a thematic exhibition at the Museum Frieder Burda in Baden-Baden. The starting point for the exhibition was a major

work from the collection, Gerhard Richter’s “Kerze” (Candle) from 1982. Karin Kneffel, who had studied under Richter as a master student, took his work as the inspiration for her series. We see a burning or just extinguished, still smoking candle in front of various backgrounds that remain shadowy and open. We believe we can make out a house illuminated in the dark, a landscape, an interior or a fogged-up pane of glass, but these impressions are fleeting. Sometimes, the candle appears as a reflection, but again quite freely – as a doppelgänger, as a mirror image, as a sister at another point in time. What about light and the extinguishing of light, one might ask, what about life and death? What remains?

Due to their monumentality and the power of the flame, the **fire paintings** (1991–1996) exude a more dynamic, less contemplative atmosphere. At this time, Karin Kneffel was particularly fascinated by the motif of fire, whose liveliness, with its flickering and ambient sound, is perhaps best captured in a moving image. However, she approached the subject in a two-dimensional way, creating in her paintings a precarious balance in the representation of fire between the destructive, unstoppable elemental force and the fascination and purifying effect that fire can also have. Perhaps, at the end of this text, we have thus arrived at a new beginning, a resurrection from the ashes.

Text contribution (shortened; translation by Gérard Goodrow, Cologne) by Anna Wesle from the catalogue of the exhibition "Karin Kneffel. Face of a Woman, Head of a Child" at the Museum Kurhaus Kleve – Ewald Mataré Collection, Kleve, and the Museum Franz Gertsch, Burgdorf. The catalogue is available in the museum shop.

Room 2-4: Karin Kneffel. Face of a Woman, Head of a Child

Biography

Born 1957 in Marl (DE)
Lives and works in Düsseldorf (DE)

2019 Member of the North Rhine-Westphalian Academy of Sciences, Humanities and the Arts, Düsseldorf, Germany

2008-2023 Professor at the Academy of Fine Arts, Munich, Germany

2000-2008 Professor at the University of the Arts, Bremen, Germany

2000 Visiting professor at the Iceland University of the Arts, Reykjavik, Iceland

1998 Visiting professor at the University of the Arts, Bremen, Germany

1981-1987 Student of Johannes Brus, Norbert Tadeusz and Gerhard Richter at the Staatliche Kunstakademie, Düsseldorf, Germany; attends a master class led by Gerhard Richter

1977-1981 Studies German philology and philosophy at the Westfälische Wilhelms-Universität, Münster, Germany, and at the Gesamthochschule, Duisburg, Germany

Awards and grants

2016 Cologne Fine Art Award, Cologne (DE)

2011 Helmut Kraft Stiftung Prize (DE)

1996 Scholarship from the Villa Massimo, Rome (IT)

1994 Lingen Art Prize, Lingen (DE)

1992 Scholarship from the Kunstfonds Bonn (DE)

1991 Karl Schmidt-Rottluff, scholarship (DE)

1984-1985 Six-month scholarship abroad, at the Cité Internationale des Arts, Paris (FR)

Selected solo exhibitions

2024 „Karin Kneffel: Face of a Woman, Head of a Child“, Museum Franz Gertsch, Burgdorf (CH)
„Karin Kneffel“, Museum Küppersmühle, Duisburg (DE)

2023 „Karin Kneffel“, Galerie Schönewald, Düsseldorf (DE)
„Karin Kneffel: Face of a Woman, Head of a Child“, Museum Kurhaus Kleve –Ewald Mataré-Sammlung, Kleve (DE)

2022 „Intervention in die Sammlung“, Staatsgalerie Stuttgart, Stuttgart (DE)
„Ein Gruss aus der Küche“, Schloss Detmold, Lippische Gesellschaft für Kunst, Detmold (DE)
„Im Augenblick“, Max Ernst Museum, Bruhl (DE)
„Im Bild“, Franz Marc Museum, Kochel am See (DE)
„Face of a Woman, Head of a Child“, Gagosian Gallery, Rom (IT)

2021 „Sunday Open ‘Mies in Mind’“, Galerie Friese, Berlin (DE)
„Realität geht anders!“, Fritz und Hildegard Ruoff Stiftung, Nürtingen (DE)

2020 „Re/Konstruktion“, Galerie Friese, Berlin (DE)
„Haymatlos“, Dirimart, Istanbul (TUR)

2019 „STILL“, Kunsthalle Bremen, Bremen, Museum Frieder Burda, Baden-Baden (DE)

2018 „private viewing“, Gagosian Gallery, New York (USA)

2017 „Bild im Bild“, Kunstmuseum Bonn, Bonn (DE)
„Bild im Bild“, in Kooperation mit dem Kunstmuseum Bonn, Kinderakademie, Fulda (DE)
„Karin Kneffel zu Gast im David-Hansemann-Haus“, DROEGE ART COLLECTION, Düsseldorf (DE)

2016 Gagosian Gallery, Los Angeles (USA)
Galerie Rüdiger Schöttle, München (DE)

2015 „Fallstudien. Arbeiten auf Papier“, Käthe Kollwitz Museum, Köln und Kunsthalle Bremerhaven und Kunstverein Bremerhaven (DE)
Galerie Friese, Berlin (DE)

2014 „La ventana y el espejo. Window and Mirror“, MACUF – Museo de Arte Contemporáneo Unión Fenosa, A Coruña (ES)
Galeria Senda, Barcelona (ES)
Pavillon Mies van der Rohe, Barcelona (ES)

2013 „Butter never crossed my mind“, Galerie Schönewald und Beuse, Düsseldorf (DE)
„Karin Kneffel. Haymatlos“, Dirimart, Istanbul (TR)

2012 Gagosian Gallery, New York (USA)
Galerie Fred Jahn, München (DE)

2010 Kunsthalle Tübingen, Tübingen (DE)
Galerie Ludorff, Düsseldorf (DE)

2009 „Haus am Stadtrand“, Kunstmuseen Krefeld, Museum Haus Esters, Krefeld (DE)

2008 „Looking Glass“, Galerie Friese, Stuttgart, Städtische Galerie Offenburg, Offenburg (DE)
Barbara Mathes Gallery, New York (USA)
„Feuer“, Kunst-Station Sankt Peter, Köln (DE)

2007 „Feuer“, Kunstmuseum Stuttgart, Stuttgart (DE)
„Arbeiten auf Papier / Prints“, Edition Staeck, Heidelberg (DE)
Barbara Mathes Gallery, New York (USA)

2006 „Verführung und Distanz“, Ulmer Museum, Ulm (DE)
Museum Sinclair-Haus, ALTANA Kulturforum Mönchehaus Museum Goslar
Christine König Galerie, Wien (AT)

2005 Galerie manus presse, Stuttgart (DE)
Galeria Vanguardia, Bilbao (ES)

Room 2-4: Karin Kneffel. Face of a Woman, Head of a Child

- 2004 Galeria Senda, Barcelona (ES)
Barbara Mathes Gallery, New York (USA)
- 2003 Haus Fürstenberg, Galerie Schönwald, Xanten (DE)
- 2002 Christine König Galerie, Wien (AT)
- 2000 „Le Case d’Arte“, Galerie Pasquale Leccese, Mailand (IT)
Galerie Bob van Orsouw, Zürich (CH)
Kunsthalle Emden, Emden (DE)
- 1999 Musée Jean de La Fontaine, Château-Thierry (FR)
Castello di Rivara, Turin (IT)
- 1998 Galerie Jouse Seguin, Paris (FR)
Galerie Johnen und Schöttle, Köln (DE)
- 1997 Accademia Tedesca Villa Massimo, Rom (IT)
Galerie Rüdiger Schöttle, München (DE)
Galerie Bob van Orsouw, Zürich (CH)
- 1996 Forum Kunst Rottweil, Rottweil (DE)
Le Case d’Arte, Galerie Pasquale Leccese, Mailand (IT)
- 1995 The Corridor, H. Th. Fridjonsson, Reykjavik (IS)
Galerie Schönwald und Beuse, Krefeld (DE)
- 1994 Kunstverein Bremerhaven, Bremerhaven (DE)
Galerie Wanda Reiff, Amsterdam (NL)
Kunstverein Heilbronn, Heilbronn (DE)
Galerie Jousse Seguin, Paris (FR)
Kunstverein Lingen, Lingen (DE)
Het Kruithuis, Stedelijk Museum voor Hedendaagse Kunst, s’Hertogenbosch (NL)
- 1993 Galeria Senda, Barcelona (S)
Art Cologne, Köln (DE), Einzelkoje bei Galerie Sophia Ungers, Köln (DE)
Galerie Agathe Nisple, St. Gallen (CH)
- 1992 Galerie Schütz, Frankfurt am Main (DE)
Galerie Rüdiger Schöttle, Paris (FR)
Galerie Tabea Langenkamp, Düsseldorf (DE)
- Art Cologne, Köln (DE), Förderkoje der Galerie Schutz, Frankfurt am Main (DE)
- 1991 Galerie Sophia Ungers, Köln (DE)
Galerie Rüdiger Schöttle, München (DE)
- 1990 Galerie Schütz, Frankfurt am Main (DE)
Dr. A.H. Murken, Gütersloh (DE)
- 1989 Galerie Tabea Langenkamp, Düsseldorf (DE)
Galerie Sophia Ungers, Köln (DE)
- 1988 Raum 404, Heidelberg (DE)
- 1984 Galerie Rüdiger Schöttle, München (DE)
- Selected group exhibitions**
- 2024 „Chapeau Fred“, Galerie Jahn und Jahn, München (DE)
„Mit anderen Augen“, Franz Marc Museum, Kochel am See (DE)
- 2023 „forty years of The Corridor / Gangurinn Gallery“, The National Gallery of Iceland, Reykjavík (IS)
„Die Welt vom sechsten Schöpfungstag“, Galerie Friese, Berlin (DE)
„Floating Islands“, Istanbul Modern Museum, Istanbul (TR)
„Figur“, Galerie Friese, Berlin (DE)
„AQUA_ Tage der Kunst“, Schwalmtal (DE)
„Kunst im Rheinland“, Galerie Ludorff, Düsseldorf (DE)
- 2022 „Ain’t no mountain high enough“, Galerie Peter Gaugy, Wien (AT)
„Street Life – Die Strasse in der Kunst von Kirchner bis Streuli“, Wilhelm-Hack-Museum, Ludwigshafen am Rhein (DE)
„Last Call/ Karin Kneffel +11 – First Call / Lo-haus Sominsky“, Galerie LOHAUS SOMINSKY, München (DE)
- 2021 „wild/schön. Tiere in der Kunst“, Kunsthalle Emden, Emden (DE)
„7 Künstler*innen – 7 Räume“, Galerie Friese, Berlin (DE)
„Ain’t no mountain high enough“, Ze Tux Gallery, Tux (AT)
„Karin Kneffel plus Meisterschüler, cling together swing together“, Galerie Noah, Augsburg (DE)
„Karin Kneffel plus fünf Meisterschüler. Das dritte Bild entsteht im Kopf“, Rathausgalerie / Kunsthalle, München (DE)
„Manet und Astruc – Künstlerfreunde“, Kunsthalle Bremen, Bremen (DE)
- 2020 „Moving Energies – 10 years, me Collectors Room Berlin“, me Collectors Room, Berlin, Stiftung Olbricht, Berlin (DE)
„Power! Von den Energien in der Kunst“, Städtische Galerie, Villingen-Schwenningen (DE)
„Still Leben“, Galerie Friese, Berlin (DE)
„Forget Part II der Ausstellungstrilogie ‘Don’t Forget Your Mask’“, Galerie Jahn und Jahn, München (DE)
„Re/Konstruktion“, Galerie Friese, Berlin (DE)
„The Poetic Object“, Galerie Schönwald, Düsseldorf (DE)
„Licht vor der Haustür“, Galerie Schönwald, Düsseldorf (DE)
- 2019 „Geheimnis der Dinge. Malstücke“, Kunsthalle Recklinghausen (DE)
„Feine Früchtchen, Sammlung Dr. Rainer Wild“, Museum im Prediger, Schwäbisch Gmünd (DE)

More information: www.kneffel.de