

frieze

By Mitch Speed 22 June, 2017

Thomas Schütte

carlier | gebauer, Berlin, Germany

If there's a place left in this world for big, brooding, yet resolutely nuanced artworks, then Thomas Schütte has found it. His looming bronzes and ceramics are complex characters, like hybrids of Giacometti's elegiac wanderers and Willem Grimm's fairy-tale ghouls. Endless prints and watercolours counterpoint these figures, striating his oeuvre's moody disposition with a knowing innocence. Through this combination of styles (which on occasion stretches to include modernist architectural models and structures), the artist has wrought a personal mythology based on methodological non-compliance. In his latest solo show at carlier | gebauer, Schütte distances ceramics and woodcuts from their stereotypical, folkish connotations, creating newly enigmatic objects that resonate with a spectra of bodily, psychological, and historical associations. Ruminations are triggered as a result: on the way we humans also seem lost in time, bewildered by the question of how to reconcile fraught, mythologized cultural histories with life in present time.



Thomas Schütte, Bronzefrauen, 2017, bronze

This temporal anxiety is echoed most potently by eight unframed woodcut prints, which weft medieval motifs with nimbly placed evidence of the contemporary. In *Woodcut (Brick Wall)* (2011), the texture left by the factory-produced chipboard used in the printing process co-exists with a crisply-rendered red brick wall, which slips between castle rampart, modern brownstone and the digital bricks of Super Mario. A cluster of large, cylindrical ceramics collectively titled *Gartenzwerge* (Garden Gnomes, 2015-16) similarly shape-shifts between temporal registers, assimilating multiple historical echoes – wheel-thrown vases; the charming but creepy uniformity of Russian nesting dolls – into uncannily singular objects.



Thomas Schütte, 2017, installation view, carlier | gebauer.

But these brightly-glazed objects also resemble abstracted chess pieces, enlarged to the size of small children. And so the ceramic works murmur with a conflicted energy, as an aesthete's fetish for material and surface mixes with a faint, nihilistic disposition; an impulse to ensconce the human figure within a beautiful but faceless decorative shape. This ungraspability is Schütte's most seductive trick, and it is delivered to salacious effect in two Janus-faced ceramic heads named *Großer Doppelkopf Nr. 4* and *Großer Doppelkopf Nr. 6* (Large Double Head, nos 4 and 6, both 2015). In the former, a beach-ball-sized, lemon-yellow face, bearded and run through with long carving marks, abuts a second visage, wherein milky-white melts through the yellow glaze. Literally split between statuesque authority and abject decomposition, this double-header could be a cipher for the global north's collective psychic state, at once prideful of its far-reaching authority and paralyzed by a panicked recognition of its own idiotic death-drive.



Thomas Schütte, 2017, installation view, carlier | gebauer.

At times, Schütte's confidence in delivering such psycho-dramatic effects seems to have numbed him to more specific, thorny meanings. His 'Frauen' series – large, cartoony odalisques, represented here by three small versions titled *Bronzefrauen* (2017) – wither in their own re-inscription of sexist tropes: the depiction of women as beings whose only purpose is to pose, naked and prone. Were the artist to speak about his intentions, such works might retain their ironic critical potential. Instead, Schütte's talks are characterized by a feline elusiveness, always slipping away from the work's actual content towards descriptions of process. When the art is as tone-deaf as the 'Frauen' sculptures, this comportment causes the works to languish as vacant adaptations of brutish historical tropes. But when it is as energetically fraught as the bulk of this show, his quietness amplifies the voice of each object. In other words, there is a literal body language at work here, which speaks to the weirdness of being a person, now, with a sonority rarely achieved by words.