

# Thomas Erben Gallery

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## JUTTA KOETHER

THOMAS ERBEN GALLERY

Jutta Koether is an artist who paints, but she is not exclusively a "painter." She is also a performance artist, musician, writer, and art and music critic. And while painting sometimes plays a supporting role in her performance art, in her music for example, it isn't part of the mix at all. Yet her interests always overlap, establishing common ground. One such area is the aesthetics of punk, through which Koether channels German "bad painting," East Village garishness, and flashy '80s commodity art in a range of styles that are historically savvy yet burst with youthful energy. Critique is not part of the picture, nor is irony—Koether doesn't appropriate earlier styles in order to empty them out or dissipate their power. Rather, she samples a range of good, bad, and ugly painterly genres with such verve that her paintings seem happy and carefree even if, at times, they verge on chaotic mess. Their sense of jubilation makes them more compatible with contemporary attitudes in art, specifically with the current penchant for juvenilia and laid-back, faux-adolescent aesthetics.

Koether's first New York survey, "I Is Had Gone," brought together a cross-section of paintings from 1990 to the present. These were installed in a tacky interior that featured dull silver walls, large mirrored Mylar panels draped with a single, unfinished piece of golden fabric, a curtain made of silver and gold streamers, and a large silver ball in place of the usual museum bench. The effect was part fun-house, part hip club. On the show's opening night, the gallery was lit with strobes, recalling '80s installations in downtown hangouts like Area and the Palladium, with a nod to the landmark "Times Square Show" of 1981.



Jutta Koether, *Living Desire (Disarmed)*, 2000, acrylic on canvas, 24 x 20". From the series "Hysterics," 2000–.

Koether's best paintings are those with turbulent fields of layered, translucent color embedded with figurative elements reminiscent of the visionary language of tarot cards, and enmeshed in floating skeins of looping swirls that rhythmically cover the works' entire surfaces. *People's Portrait*, 2000, features a central white starburst studded with a pair of red ovals that read as disembodied alien eyes, superimposed on a whirling, feathery spiral. *Das Wunder*, 1990, a boisterous red and yellow canvas in which hectic yet lyrical brushwork coexists with a multitude of transparent doodles (some resembling faces), also features a superimposed text that betrays her predilection for inscriptions with a philosophical bent: DAS WUNDER, DAS WUNDER, IST WIE IMMER (Wonder, Wonder Is Always Us) is written in huge, clumsy letters on the surface of the painting, affirming a sense of transcendental hopefulness. But the conceptual edginess Koether packs into her pictures is equally important.

While many of Koether's paintings are radiant and ecstatic, and come accessorized with spiritually uplifting texts or smiling faces (as in *Antibody III [Passionate Power and Rules of Action]*, 1993), the artist refuses to deliver works that are too easily edifying, likeable, or beautiful. Like a true punk, she attacks with a vengeance the complacency that characterizes "new age" aesthetics. The scrambled syntax of the show's title, "I Is Had Gone," together with the shiny Mylar and cheap tinsel, is symptomatic of the positive, disruptive power of the nonsensical elements that drive her art. Koether's work, which has never found a niche in the market but has earned her a huge cult following, has yet to receive the recognition it truly deserves; but its cumulative effect is powerful nonetheless. After twenty years of work, Koether is well on her way to becoming an "overnight sensation."

—Jan Avgikos

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SUMMER 2005

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