

Tactical Hugs Practical Shrugs

Christoph Matthes

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Consider the accordion. The primary organ of German polka, the source of the oom-pah in Mexico's música norteno south of the border—the accordion, an instrument both momentous and utterly mundane, a marker of history and a trinket collecting dust. In the hands of German-born painter Christoph Matthes, the humble accordion, a classic Fröhlich Schumann Cassotto model, takes on mythic qualities as the subject of the artist's strangely unforgettable painting, an accordion enormous in its mundanity. It's called daddy wants his money back, hinting at the fact that one generation squandered its capital on the next generation's artistic folly. Maybe you didn't know that accordions are very expensive.

Then again, perhaps you'll notice the zebras first—there are zebras all over Matthes's canvases, including two pairs of the black-and-white-striped stallion fully mid-copulation, both zebra couples really going at it. It's stoic, straight-faced, almost like a work on an altarpiece.

Tactical Hugs Practical Shrugs, Matthes' second solo show in New York, is a sequence of paintings and works on paper that amount to an epic referendum on the power of indifference, a love letter to the signifiers that go in and out of our lives, peppering our memories and punctuating our dreams. Look around at what's here, it's a stupendous cornucopia of capital-S Stuff: cute dogs named Robby and Bobby, butter pads, tricycles, hand scissors, more fluffy puppies, girls in gowns. What Matthes has accomplished is a major step forward for the artist, who recently relocated his studio to New York after a longtime stint in Dusseldorf, a confident display of his abilities that show a painter in full control of his gift for transcending the forgettable and making it divine.

The show turns domestic ennui hilarious and heartbreaking. Matthes has made what's got to be the best-ever ode to an RV, a paean to the power of turning the highway into your abode—that's #vanlife, baby. The painting of the mobile home is called Pride and Prejudice, which is perfect. There's a chair from the Biedermeier school, just plopped there, nobody sitting in it, just a chair. Irons flattening fabric on boards—the most boring thing in the world, ironing wrinkles out of a shirt, and here it's bursting with energy, endlessly funny, oddly mesmerizing.

Taken as a whole, Tactical Hugs Practical Shrugs is a taxonomy of middle-class detritus and bourgeois consumerism, leading up to what's maybe the masterpiece here, the massive painting of dump truck toys all stacked on top of each other, set intently against the majestic, inscrutable skeleton of a Tyrannosaurus Rex.

And every once in a while, the show is pierced by something sweetly earnest. daddy wants his money back nods to Matthes' childhood neighbor who got a €3,200 accordion from his father and never learned how to play it. The oom-pah instrument became the manifestation of a failed artistic practice, a reminder of the son's enormous disappointment to his father. But of course Matthes is the opposite of the accordion kid in Karlsruhe. The artist's painting was the final work made for the best survey of his career, a cherry on top of a show that also acted as a kiss-off to Germany, the last painting made in his Dusseldorf studio before moving to New York City. The kids are alright.

—Nate Freeman