

Press Release

Martha Jungwirth

Herz der Finsternis

17 April—29 September 2024
The Palazzo Cini Gallery, Venice



Martha Jungwirth, *Ohne Titel*, aus der Serie "Porte Dorée", 2023.
Oil on paper on canvas, 242 x 276.5 cm (95.28 x 108.86 in).
© Martha Jungwirth. Photo: Ulrich Ghezzi.

The Fondazione Giorgio Cini presents an exhibition of new works by Austrian artist Martha Jungwirth, curated by Luca Massimo Barbero, Director of the Institute of Art History of the Fondazione Giorgio Cini, and supported by Thaddaeus Ropac gallery, coinciding with the 60th Venice Biennale. Over her career of six decades, Jungwirth has forged a singular approach to abstraction that is grounded in the body and closely observed perceptions of the world around her. The artist draws upon 'pretexts' that become the triggers for fleeting, internal impulses that inform her vivid, expressive paintings. In *Herz der Finsternis*, Jungwirth takes Joseph Conrad's eponymous 1899 novella,

Heart of Darkness, as the starting point for her recent body of work.

The exhibition's German title references Conrad's book, which Jungwirth read as a young woman. It tells the fictionalised story of a Belgian steamboat expedition up the Congo River and explores the darkness and brutality of European colonialism in Africa at the time. After visiting the Musée de l'histoire de l'immigration at the Palais de la Porte Dorée, a building constructed for the Paris Colonial Exposition of 1931, the tale found its way back into Jungwirth's mind. Deeply moved by what she saw, her visit to the

museum inspired this latest series of paintings titled *Porte Dorée*. She explains: ‘The subjects of migration and persecution have taken on a completely different reality for me. It disturbed me, this long history of displacement, and how it is still going on today.’



Martha Jungwirth, *Ohne Titel (Das Bündel II)*, aus der Serie “*Porte Dorée*”, 2023.
Oil on paper on canvas, 241.5 x 170 cm (95.08 x 66.93 in).
© Martha Jungwirth. Photo: Ulrich Ghezzi.

With a wide range of painterly gestures, Jungwirth distils her experience to its purest essence, giving her feelings and impressions form through her work. ‘The paintings I am showing were made directly after my trip to Paris and my emotions and my memories were still very current and alive in me.’ Known for a palette that dwells in a corporeal and sensuous register of fleshy pinks and reds, the unexpected lush green and petrol tones of her latest works reference the dense green landscape of the Central African rainforest, which is described in vivid detail in *Heart of Darkness*: ‘The great wall of vegetation, an exuberant and entangled mass of trunks, branches, leaves, boughs, festoons, motionless in the moonlight, was like a rioting invasion of soundless life, a rolling wave of plants.’ As is typical of Jungwirth’s work, some areas of ground are left bare, allowing the texture

of her cardboard supports to appear – for empty space is as important to her as colour.

Characterised by decisive brushstrokes, Jungwirth’s work is poised somewhere between intuition and calculation, balancing representation and sheer materiality. Although residing primarily in abstraction, recognisable elements often emerge from her dynamic marks. In contrast to the rational principles of minimalism and conceptualism that emerged in the 1960s and 1970s, Jungwirth’s paintings convey a palpable sense of self. As she has described, ‘My art is like a diary, seismographic. That is the method of my work. Drawing and painting are a movement that runs through me.’ She describes her painting process as an ‘adventure,’ driven by a direct rhythm involving the body, with finger marks and scratches asserting a visceral record of her presence in the work; ‘my painting is action and passion: a dynamic space.’

Luca Massimo Barbero emphasises ‘the intensity with which Martha Jungwirth has discovered and traversed Palazzo Cini, harmonising the magnificence of the past with the existential contemporaneity of painting. It is precisely this way of moving like a seismograph – as she herself says – that allows her to exist within painting as if on the edge of an abyss, accompanying us to observe it and to feel ourselves plummeting within. Every brushstroke is a reference to the human condition, every canvas is its physical, visual, and material correspondence.’

The *Porte Dorée* series spans both expansive large-scale works and smaller paintings, which are no less charged with physical intensity. For the artist, the large and smaller formats each hold their specific advantage. She alternates between them as she works, which allows for a ‘fluid painting process’. As Jungwirth describes: ‘When you work on a large format, there is less density, you have the feeling that options are open and there is room to do more – until suddenly you can’t go on, there are no more blotches!’ By turning, then, to the smaller formats she is able to transfer the energy that is still inside of her to continue on a different scale. ‘Once that is spent as well, I can return to the large work. I then have the strength and the confidence to finish the large painting and, at one point, step away and leave it as it is.’



Martha Jungwirth, *Ohne Titel*, aus der Serie "Porte Dorée", 2023.
Oil on paper on canvas, 218.5 x 236.5 cm (86.02 x 93.11 in).
© Martha Jungwirth. Photo: Ulrich Ghezzi.

About the artist

Martha Jungwirth was born in 1940 in Vienna, where she continues to live and work. She was a co-founder and the only female member of the Viennese collective *Wirklichkeiten (Realities)*, whose work was exhibited at the Secession, Vienna, in 1968. The group exhibited together from 1968–72 and, in 1977, Jungwirth was included in *documenta 6* in Kassel. More recently, an entire room was dedicated to her work in the exhibition curated by Albert Oehlen for the Essl Museum, Klosterneuburg in 2010. A career retrospective spanning five decades was shown at the Kunsthalle Krems in 2014, followed by an exhibition focusing on her watercolours at the Kunstmuseum Ravensburg in 2018. That same year, she received

the prestigious Oskar Kokoschka Prize awarded by the Austrian state, accompanied by an extensive solo exhibition at the Albertina in Vienna. A retrospective at the Museum Liaunig in Neuhaus marked the occasion of the artist's 80th birthday in 2020. The following year, Jungwirth was awarded the Grand Austrian State Prize, the Republic's highest commendation for an outstanding life's work in the field of art. In 2022, the Kunsthalle Düsseldorf celebrated her work with an extensive solo exhibition spanning from the 1970s until today, and her presentation at Palazzo Cini coincides with the opening of a major career retrospective at the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao, opening in June 2024.

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