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Artist of the week 197: Ellen Gronemeyer

The Berlin-based artist's thickly layered paintings are intense yet whimsical, with spectral characters alongside dancing acrobats

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Saunalandschaft by Ellen Gronemeyer, oil on canvas board 2012.

The young Berlin-based artist Ellen Gronemeyer's paintings look more like barnacled slabs of coastal rock than something made by human hands. Typically, they are rugged with pigment, slowly built up in fine flecks like so many accretions of silt and sea life. From a distance, they have the steely sheen of granite, but get up close and speckles of vibrant colour glint brightly.

Within the grizzled paint, scenes emerge that could be plucked from dreams or fairytales. Gargoyle faces gape like creatures trapped in stone; boys and girls are lost in landscapes thorny with brushmarks. There are women with pointed faces in Harlequin coats, and sensible-looking sorts in spectacles or beribboned twin-sets, who all sprout cats' whiskers. Some of Gronemeyer's creations have bug eyes and grin like comic book characters while others have no features at all.

Sometimes black paint is scratched and scoured to reveal lurking layers of colour, as with the Art Brut paintings of Jean Dubuffet. Gronemeyer's exuberant use of oils also recall the churning canvasses of German neo-expressionists like Georg Baselitz or Anselm Kiefer. Yet far from an epic address to her country's history, her painting feels personal and singular and she often works on a small scale, scarcely bigger than a sheet from a storybook.

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Many of the new works in Gronemeyer's current show, *I Have a Difficult Childhood*, are looser, flatter and lighter than her best-known output. There are dancing acrobats that are closer to the fluid, lively lines of Quentin Blake's children's illustrations than the Brothers Grimm. But like all good fairytales, this whimsy has a double edge. The children's heads that amass like birthday balloons in *Saunaland*, with party streamer curls of paint, recall the spectral female faces that outsider artist and spirit medium Madge Gill was compelled to draw. In *Tunnelblick*, a tunnel of a mouth opens wide in a wail. Meanwhile, the title of a thickly pasted image of a mad, monstrous face translates as *I'm Invading Again*. Cartoon googly eyes seem to peer from everywhere.

The keyhole is one of Gronemeyer's recurring motifs, full of sexual and psychological implications: a thing to unlock doors or be peeked through. Looking goes deep in this work, whose riches must be seen at close quarters to be fully appreciated.

Why we like her: For the enigmatic *Gruppenspiel*, or "group game", which apparently depicts a schoolgirl choir. All turn their heads towards an invisible choirmaster, except for one girl in the top right who stares in the opposite direction, her attention mysteriously caught.

Going slow: Unsurprisingly, Gronemeyer's intense paintings take time and her shows have been few and far between. Thanks to recently becoming a mother, she's shifted gear, creating faster, flatter works alongside the encrusted canvasses.

Where can I see her? At Greengrassi, London, to 28 July.