

frieze

Ellen Gronemeyer

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Greengrassi, London, UK



Ellen Gronemeyer, *Strawberryfield*, 2015, oil on canvas, 90 x 100 cm

Cute, covered with luscious muck and crammed with oddball surprises, Ellen Gronemeyer's paintings are seriously discombobulating. It feels weird to claim that the 12 new works by the German artist in 'Keine Minute Ruhe' (Not a Moment's Rest) do anything 'seriously' at all because they radiate such unhinged pre-teen glee, but there is tough thought in every gory lump and giddy swirl. Rejecting the bogus maturity that might be achieved by depicting something other than friendly beasts or unnerving little girls, Gronemeyer provides a bunch of anarchic cartoon scenes that are rich with stimulation for thinking about many things – including the risks (smart or dumb) that a painter takes when adopting childlike methods. She's also invented her own animal, a kind-hearted crossbreed of a giraffe and dog that's hanging out at the party in *Melt!* (all works 2015) alongside multiple burnt-out versions of Charlie Brown and Linus from Charles M. Schulz's comic Strip *Peanuts* (1950-2000).

Amongst Gronemeyer's other accomplishments is an uproarious renovation of that tired phrase 'a feast for the eyes'. If, from a distance, her paintings can look coarse enough to have been done on shingle, up close they glow with such garish life they can ignite curious urges to lick or bite them. Huge fun to explore, they cause the dizzying visual equivalent of a childhood sugar rush: the impasto is thick, like the mind-addling icing on some monster cake, but the artist also includes hunger with bubblegum colours, porridge-like encrustations and lurid gobbets of syrupy goo. The girl in *Imagine* only has a few teeth, all gone rusty with sweet decay, but there's more intoxicating stuff on her mind. Pimples, fat as planets, are scattered across her face. There are eyeballs, frequently floating in mid-air, scratched and carved across every work with smitten abandon. Jittery and ubiquitous, they could be symbols of our modern predicament – forever gawking at images of ourselves, our friends and the chaos that surrounds us. But they would need to be more glazed, perhaps, if they were to faithfully portray this situation. More than acid social commentary, Gronemeyer's eyes seem like frisky signals that her work rewards being stared at, rapt, for a long time.

Through these messy excesses, Gronemeyer plays with the more eccentric behaviour of paint, tracking how it flows, hardens or turns furry across a canvas and sometimes drools over its edges. Many moods are broadcast by all this energetic slathering – bliss, rage, lethargy – communicating the riot of excitable activity, occasionally curdling into

panic, within a brain that can find, as the show's title suggest, no respite. *Liebe Liese* (Dear Liese) shows two girls, knees tight to their chests, wearing slightly malevolent expressions of dissociated joy. One of the girl's heads is shown in crosssection – revealing a mind turned frenzied, a roiling blue scrawl attempting to escape her skull.

Strawberryfield throws things into a vaguely sinister stupor. To catch the drift of its merry terrors, imagine if the proto-expressionist Belgian painter James Ensor, known for his carnivals filled with leering clowns, skulls and miscellaneous grotesques, were responsible for that 'Pink Elephants on Parade' sequence in Disney's *Dumbo* (1941). In a dopily medicinal-pink room, a poor kid hides as a jumble of disembodied adult heads drift around like lost balloons, looking anxious, wicked or just hungry. Watch out for the howling apparition in the corner with the hollow eyes.

Setting you loose in the playground of her imagination, Gronemeyer recaptures childhood as an era of queasy confusions and perverse thrills. But this hyperactivity is hard-won: these are slow marvels, dense with evidence of patient reworking where past scenes have been dreamt up, then buried. Innocence and experience are mixed together into a delicious mess, which means, of course, that they're an accurate account of what it's like to be young.

- Charlie Fox