Brand-New-Life
Magazin für Kunstkritik

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All His Beams Full-Dazzling

Vittorio Brodmann at Kunsthalle Bern

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For the past five years the paintings of Vittorio Brodmann have relied on a commitment to small-scale canvases and surrealistic animated figuration. In his first major institutional solo, *Water Under the Bridge*, Brodmann keeps the latter while adding monumentality to the scale of his artistic ambitions. It's an invigorating and generous slam dunk, breaking open new and exciting avenues for his work.



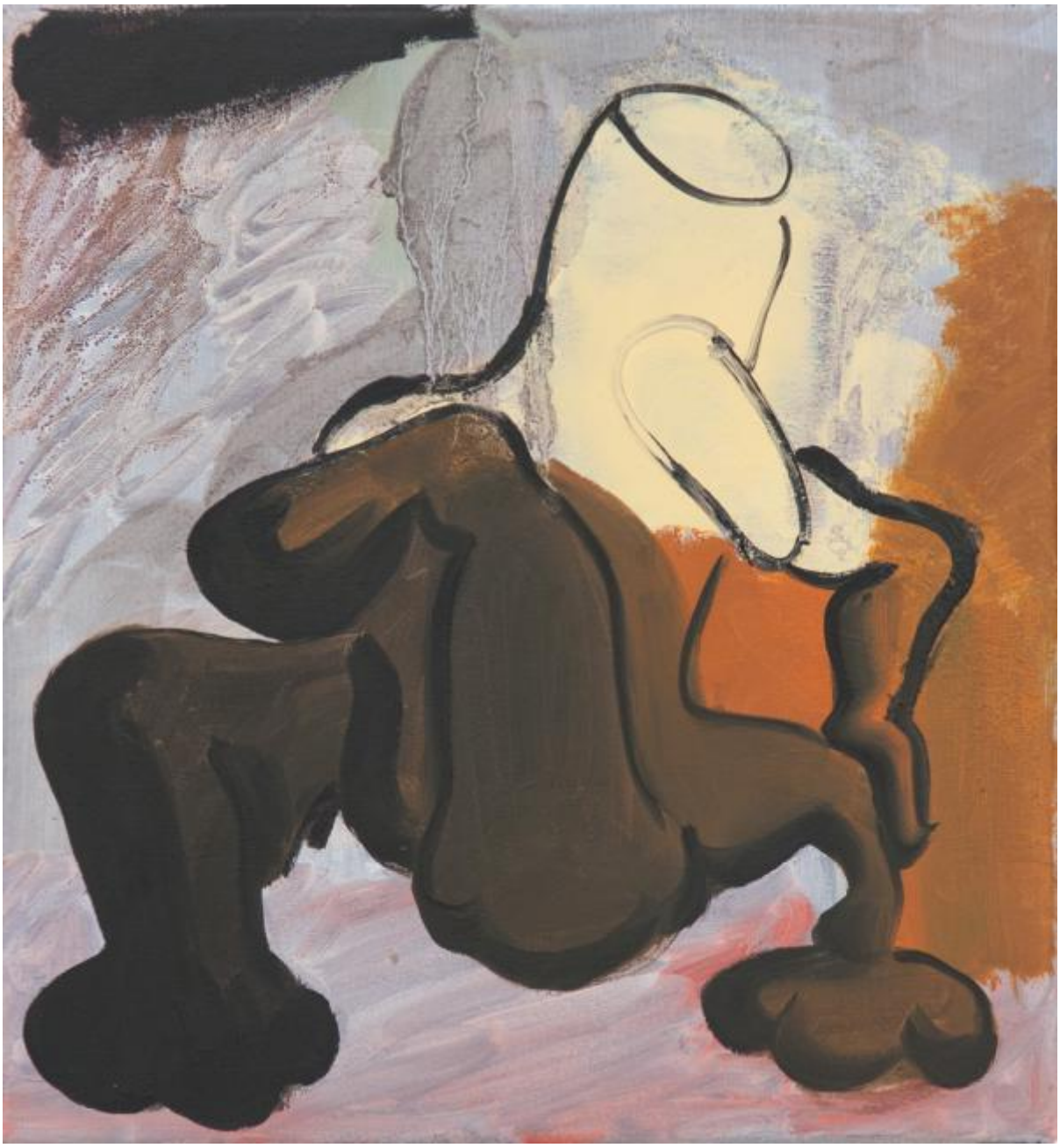
On entering *Ist die Katze aus dem Haus, tanzen die Mäuse auf dem Tisch* (2016) visually fills the entrance of the following room. It's a gigantic painting, engulfing the entirety of the largest wall in the building's most central space. Executed in acrylic and charcoal, giant figures and forms in slender lines, recalling illustration and classic animation, interact across multiple fields of depth and color. It is commanding, light and airy, with the canvas stained in pastel hues that seep and spread against and within one another, at times becoming part of the figuration. At other points they ignore the figurative and the rules of spills to create a constructed and strange play on layers. Two rectangular areas that form most of the background on the right hide from the eye, while the curving back of an anteater-like character continues into a near full oval throughout. Brodmann's work, and this in particular, has an openness and lack of pretension that is rare for so much successful ambition. The way in which he breezily handles paint with a quality free of chest bumping and masculine positioning is unheard of at this scale and in the medium in general. One cannot compare the surfaces of the ‹great› large-scale painters of the past five decades (Picasso, Pollock, Rothko, Baselitz, Polke, Doig, Bradford etc.) with these works. Even Philip Guston, whose late commitment to imagery would be a nice place to form relations, always turned the paintbrush into a violent object. Brodmann outright rejects the stereotypes of gender painting elicits. Through the oeuvre one feels a constant gentleness of execution even when the paint is thick. He always chooses to make love to the canvas rather than fuck it. This focus on pleasure, both given and received, is something that is felt throughout this exhibition.



Vittorio Brodmann, *Ist die Katze aus dem Haus, tanzen die Ma?use auf dem Tisch*, 2016, acrylic and charcoal on canvas, Photo: Gunnar Meier.

Up to now the largest painting exhibited by Brodmann would be described as large easel, with the majority about the size of A4 to A3 paper. Examples of these from 2011 to the present dot the other rooms of the exhibition, all of them among the densest and most painterly of his work. It is as if Brodmann is getting ready to play with space, as well as scale, and in doing it he shows a strong knowledge of visual weight. *Drowning on Dry Land* (2013) is a muddy square that pictures a character similar to the trunk of a tree. Mixed gray, brown and

goldenrod strokes comprise its entirety, with the central image formed by a cartoonist's line of sturdy black. It reminds one, though not fully, of the broom figures from *The Sorcerer's Apprentice* in Walt Disney's *Fantasia* (1940). It is iconic of the way that the artist has been able to anthropomorphize imagery with true feeling and humor and harness popular forms of representation without succumbing to the limits of directly referencing pre-established culture.



Vittorio Brodmann, *Drowning on Dry Land*, 2013, oil on canvas, Private Collection, San Francisco / Image: Courtesy the artist and Galerie Gregor Staiger, Zurich.

Extending the Frontiers (2016) is a similar format, comprising a snarling green-faced and pink-haired portrait. As is typical with the newest works in the exhibition the work shows the scars of its formation. One sees Brodmann discovering his compositions as he paints, the early lines remaining visible under the murky palette of the figure's face as his strokes grow lush and full in the hair, which becomes a subject in its own right. Immediately relating to a mix of Renaissance painting and fairy-tale illustrations it dissolves constantly the more you look, the focus distorted by a refusal to follow the standardized rules of compositional depth.

Separating Fact from Fiction (2016) and *Knot in Tongue* (2016) are human-sized single-figure compositions, painted in static fields of solid color. By the sheer talent of the other works on view, they are the weakest in the exhibition, suggesting that this size leaves something for the artist to master in the future. Their creation and inclusion is important in the cycle of the show though, as they tighten the gap between the new range of sizes he is exhibiting. It's a way of letting us know that his going big is more than mere gesture.



Vittorio Brodmann, *Separating Fact from Fiction*, 2016, acrylic and oil on canvas, Photo: Gunnar Meier.

Enough People to Fill a Canoe (2016) is a wide landscape, hung low to the ground, stretching the length of the last room. It's a remarkable display of narrative versus abstraction, with

aspects of figurative shapes abutting sprays of dense color. While the background is similar to the larger work upstairs, here, with the gravitational placement, the handling is deeper and denser. A thick black lined shape, something like a crustacean, anchors the composition at the center. It is torn apart and dissolved by an energetic splash of cherry red that switches between foreground and background. At far left, next to a large shoe and ghostly ankle, a character hovers between formation and disintegration and towards the lower right a cartoon points to the rest of the painting. Here one can see Brodmann's skill at integrating his influences — the history of painting and the drawn lays at his feet and he steps over it to go his own way.

The exhibition in general, in the scheme of Brodmann's oeuvre, becomes one of opening doors and tearing down boundaries. The sandstone sculpture in the first room, *Chain of Events* (2016), is a stoic bear relating to the permanent tables in that space. It's site specific wit, but shows an early and unexplored gift for carving. The same goes for *Squeeze Machines* (2016), a set of small, thin piggy banks made of corrugated cardboard and children's craft materials (save for a beer bottle). Beyond the artist's talent for the painted form of bizarre figurations and colorful paths lies an intense need to tell convoluted and open storylines. His is a skill for imbibing what he touches with intense emotions and deep felt humor while refusing the insular, the clubby or any inside jokes. Brodmann stands apart from his peers in his desire and execution of a new direction in painting, one where traditional gendered sensibilities of the medium are abolished for something much more accessible, boisterous and broad. This is art at its most generous without any sacrifice of quality or aspiration and Brodmann, during his first major opportunity, has chosen risk over safety. Accomplishment and achievement are beyond the point, the show is a pleasure to take in.



Vittorio Brodmann, *Squeeze Machines*, 2016, various materials, Photo: Gunnar Meier.

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doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.13930426