



Hello Goddess I'm submissiye slave looking for dominant female who can be my Goddess and lover as well. I'm so honest and serious and willing to relocate if you find me the right one for you. I wish you accept me slave under your Queenly Feet



# TURPS BANANA IN CONVER- SATION WITH BETTINA SEMMER

You are an artist with a rich body of work, or rather a sense of diverse bodies of work, and it seems to us that you are very much part of a German context that reinvigorated a critical form of painting.

**Turps Banana:** You have the *Melancholia* print by *Dürer* there on the wall.

**Bettina Semmer:** It's an ongoing theme in art...

**TB:** This word painting here sits well with that, it switches from being very conceptual and very smart to something that looks quite ancient, with an almost lead-like quality.

**BS:** Yes, and the melancholy of the words.

**TB:** In terms of painting, it isn't as if you just paint a painting, you are also looking at how that painting is placed as a thing – like the painting on a blackboard, we wonder – what is it? It isn't just “*Let's approach this formally*”, there is always a question.

**BS:** Very true. It is just oil paint on a blackboard. I can wash it. It shows I use it as a noticeboard. You are right; there is a contextual questioning.

**TB:** This does seem to be a really strong point with lots of German art where, as with Duchamp, the object is in question.

**BS:** Right. I was taught by people like Benjamin Buchloh, he gave lectures in Hamburg and I was very impressed by his taking on the *readymade* tradition and how it developed post-war. My

first teacher at art school was Lothar Baumgarten. He did a piece on *The Eagles* together with an anthropologist, so that's the influence there – that art isn't just a small thing in the art market but is a bigger thing. But also, he was looking at indigenous art in South America, and his friend was a sinologist in Nepal who looked at the Shamanism there, and I was interested in Shamanism as in my late twenties, I came across a shaman in Colombia...

**TB:** And Buchloh wrote a lot about Marcel Broodthaers

**BS:** Yes, Broodthaers' idea of the museum and collecting – looking across cultures, like at the eagle symbol – it was impressive; interesting to me.

**TB:** It's like so much of classic modern art – like Kandinsky's early trips to Siberia as an ethnologist interested in the Shamans there – way back. He returned with the idea that a painting could be like a drum – a stretched skin. That does flip ideas about abstract painting!

**BS:** Yes, some drums are painted with symbols, and not just in Siberian cultures. I often wonder why it is necessary to stretch canvas. I'm looking at ways to use 'painting' like an everyday object.

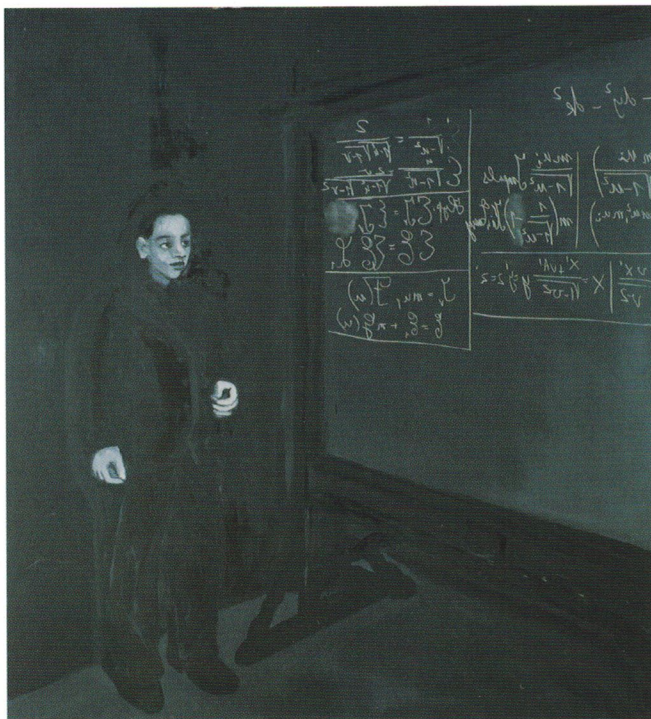
**TB:** It is like painting should have to prove itself – it doesn't start off good as if it's already art.

**BS:** It's funny, the first thing they said to me at Goldsmiths when I started my MA there in the 1990s was “*Why do you use such bad stretchers?*” They all used these big heavy stretchers; heavy objects. I'm a bit lightweight and I wanted paintings that corresponded to my body.

**TB:** You trained in anthropology at one point?

**BS:** Well a bit, I dabbled in it. We had a research group on witches in Europe – two artists and a historian and an anthropologist. It was outside of my college course in Hamburg, at the *Museum für Völkerkunde* there. The anthropologist and historian were more responsible for the science but we





Clockwise:

**Self Portrait as Albert Einstein**

1988  
Oil and chalk on canvas  
170 x 200 cm

**B. with Hood**

1990  
Oil and gouache on canvas  
160 x 160 cm

**Against Stupidity**

1986  
Public intervention on Hamburg underground  
Three wagons and windows on paper

*Courtesy of the artist*

*This is the train I painted. Twenty women artists were invited by the Hamburg newspaper and public transport, and sponsored by the paint factory. I did it like the Russian Agitprop trains that went to the villages with news of the Revolution, and then I covered the windows with cardboard – about thirty pieces for the windows. I had to come up with a lot of images in a short time; all the images were from my head – from my paintings.*





discussed everything.

**TB:** There does seem to be an overall anthropological interest and feeling in your work – you are looking at language, you are looking at children, the idea of the blackboards.

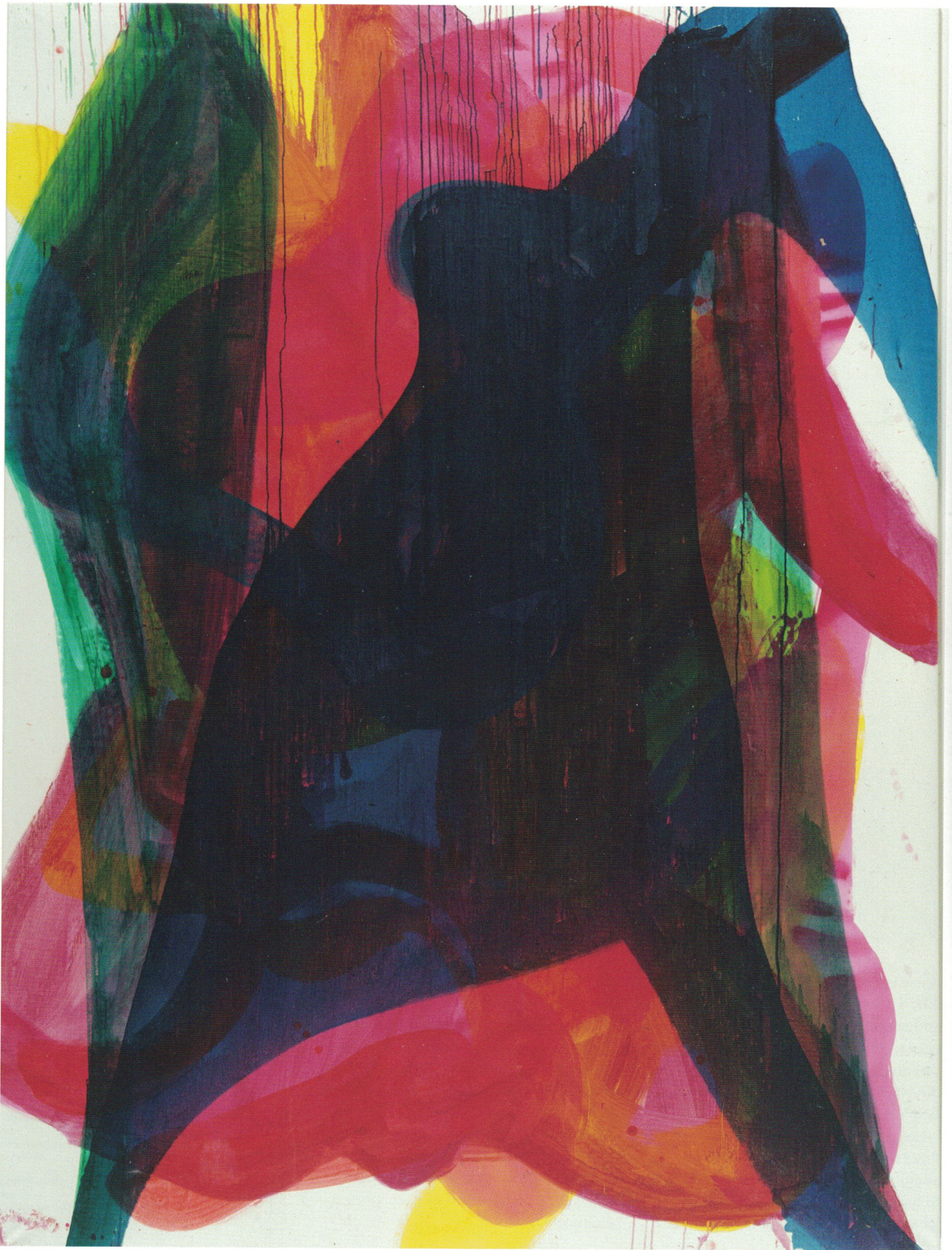
**BS:** Yes, in Africa in the Sahara – looking at the people in the Sahara – yes that encroaches on the anthropological, about the women, because no one seems to have done it, to really investigate what kind of matriarchal nature is there for sure when they had the matriarchy

disappear. It is documenting what is happening. It is true I've been looking for some kind of take on reality. With the chalk and blackboard interactive work, I went on to put these in the hallway of a school, I just put them there in the hallway and I told the children they could do anything they wanted. Letting go, giving up control, giving the space to the child playing... like setting up a *Fluxus* performance and just accepting whatever comes up.

**Balcony**  
1986  
Oil on canvas  
200 x 160 cm

*Courtesy of the artist*







Of course, if water

boils in a pot,



**Of course, if water...**

1991  
Oil and gouache on canvas  
200 x 200 cm

Courtesy of the artist

I presented huge canvases, big colourfields sometimes with the Wittgenstein quotes on them. So I'd let it dry then maybe turn it around and then paint another colourfield. My two-year-old daughter Babette would paint on them too – there was over and under. I did the same at the schools. I couldn't continue with Babette when she started to be figurative; it was another ball game, it was very different. She was perfect for this irony on abstract expressionism *"My child could do that"*.

I didn't want to exploit her as a naïve figurative [painter] where it would always look a little bit like Basquiat, or Donald Baechler or Dubuffet – this kind of thing I didn't really look for. There was something else – the anarchy, the playfulness – she could only reach a certain height and that was a composition in itself. As well as the interaction in the first place. I was doing the lettering. It was like taking apart a toy. Wittgenstein takes apart language and looks at our thinking in a very very

detached way – non judgemental – without looking for results; asking *"What is this thinking about?"* Like a child taking apart their own toy and looking at the pieces.

As soon as recognisable images come in, it becomes formulaic and the child repeats them, whereas *free play*, oh my god!

*"Where I move my brush like this – it looks like that"* – that is what we should be looking for as artists, not doing this for the results, but doing it for the sake of it. In taking it back to scratch; starting from zero and starting again. Educated trained great artists cannot do it anymore. It was watching someone doing something completely new. This is one of them – she was literally two – this is a beautiful one. The whole Wittgenstein quote is:

*"Of course, if water boils in a pot, steam comes out of the pot and also pictured steam comes out of the pictured pot – but what if one also insisted on saying that there must be something boiling in the picture of the pot?"*

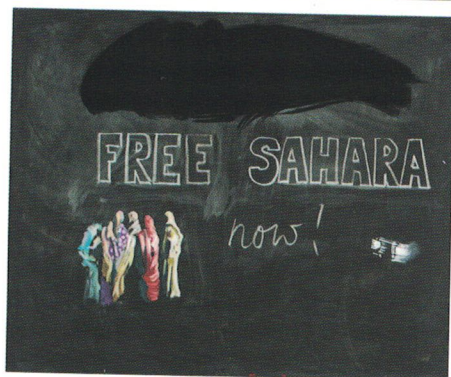


**Painting Factory**  
2001  
Assisted Painting Series  
Spacex Gallery, Exeter

Opposite: **after care no2**  
2001  
Oil on canvas  
200 x 160

Courtesy of the artist





Sahara without title  
2013 – ongoing  
Blackboard paint and oil  
110 x 130 cm

*This painting is based on blackboard paint, so you see the traces of chalk. I did this as an interactive work. It was my first impression of Western Sahara in 2010. (Western Sahara, or DARS, is a country occupied by Morocco. The Art encounters – ARTifariti – are held annually in the refugee camps near Tindouf, Algeria, and in the liberated zone. Semmer has participated five times since 2009.)*

**TB:** What was your education?

**BS:** So I went to university first – philology, society, and literature, basically media. I went to art school where I met Lothar Baumgarten, he was my first teacher. I studied at *Münster Sculpture Park – Münster Academy* – part of the art school of Dusseldorf, then I went to Hamburg and was introduced to Sigmar Polke's work and Gerhard Richter through Konrad Fischer, and so I decided to study under Polke in Hamburg. I was very disappointed, as the class didn't offer anything except drinking and taking the piss. There was no normal tutorial; it was very male dominated. This was 1975. I dropped out of university to go to art school in Hamburg, except, in my second year, I went into the anthropological department and came across the research group offer. After that, I decided to go to film class as the painting classes weren't working for me. Polke left – his students were Albert Oehlen, Georg Herold and Kippenberger. We had a loose contact while I was at film class and Albert and I started to paint together on paper – having fun trying out large-scale paper works. We fed off each other with ideas while we were doing it.

**TB:** I imagine that in the 70s, painting was seen as questionable...

**BS:** Totally.

**TB:** But you had painting classes. So at what point was it felt that *"Well: this is viable"*?

**BS:** Painting classes were totally out of the current discourse, they were something old-fashioned and dusty; not interesting. The teachers wanted to force you into their mould, except for Polke who didn't do anything! But there was Méret Oppenheim there as well – a very interesting woman. She had a guest professorship. Hamburg was a little bit different from Dusseldorf for example, the system where you had one class with one master and the students had to refer to that master, in Hamburg you could go to different classes, which is why I went to

film class but could still go to the lectures of Franz Walther for example, in his class there were interesting systems-process oriented painters – very interesting; very radical. But what was really radical then was to go back to figurative which is what Albert, Kippenberger, and I did. We also relocated to Cologne for a year. I was in touch with Max Hetzler in Stuttgart and Kippenberger was painting in his basement doing small works.

**TB:** It is quite interesting that in Germany at that time there wasn't a single capital.

**BS:** Right. Until Cologne evolved as a capital of art in the late 80s and that was crazy. It was like a festival all the time. People would mill around on one day of the month going to galleries. It was crowded with people, just art people, it was crazy. In Germany it was Cologne until Berlin became the capital. So we were aware that in Berlin there were these people doing this *Neo-Expressionism* and in Cologne, *Mülheimer Freiheit*, which was a kind of a naïve take on painting. In Hamburg it was maybe a bit more sophisticated, more twisted, in a political sense, not just *"Oh we can do a naïve kind of painting again and its ok and we are having fun"*.

In Hamburg they were also allowing themselves to use paint but in a distanced ironic way – until it became second nature and they couldn't switch anymore. But at first it was like – like an experiment. Like *"Can we use painting? How can we use it?"* Not as playful as Cologne but more *"We are going to paint in a strategic sense"*. In the background were Baselitz, Lüpertz, Immendorff, and Polke of course, in a big way – but the others, well Immendorff used his painting in a political way, his friendship with A. R. Penck through the border fence – Immendorff was illustrating issues – that was the thing, they were a group, they would gang up on everybody. Immendorff showed them in his studio in Dusseldorf. Albert was my boyfriend



at the time so there was a contradiction. They would gang up. It was said that “Women can’t paint”, but not in a harsh way. Bert Hobberlin, a painting professor at Hamburg for example, he actually said it, and I heard from another painter friend of Lothar Baumgarten in *Dusseldorf Academy* “You’re a beautiful woman; why do you also want to make beautiful paintings?” A beautiful woman had no chance – no chance at all in the art world there. Polke was always very supportive I must say. He knew about the drama; how all the boys were a gang. Georg Herold’s partner Christa Näher, later a professor at Frankfurt, made a postcard that said “Women who paint are just too lazy for work”. And it was a picture of her scrubbing the floor.

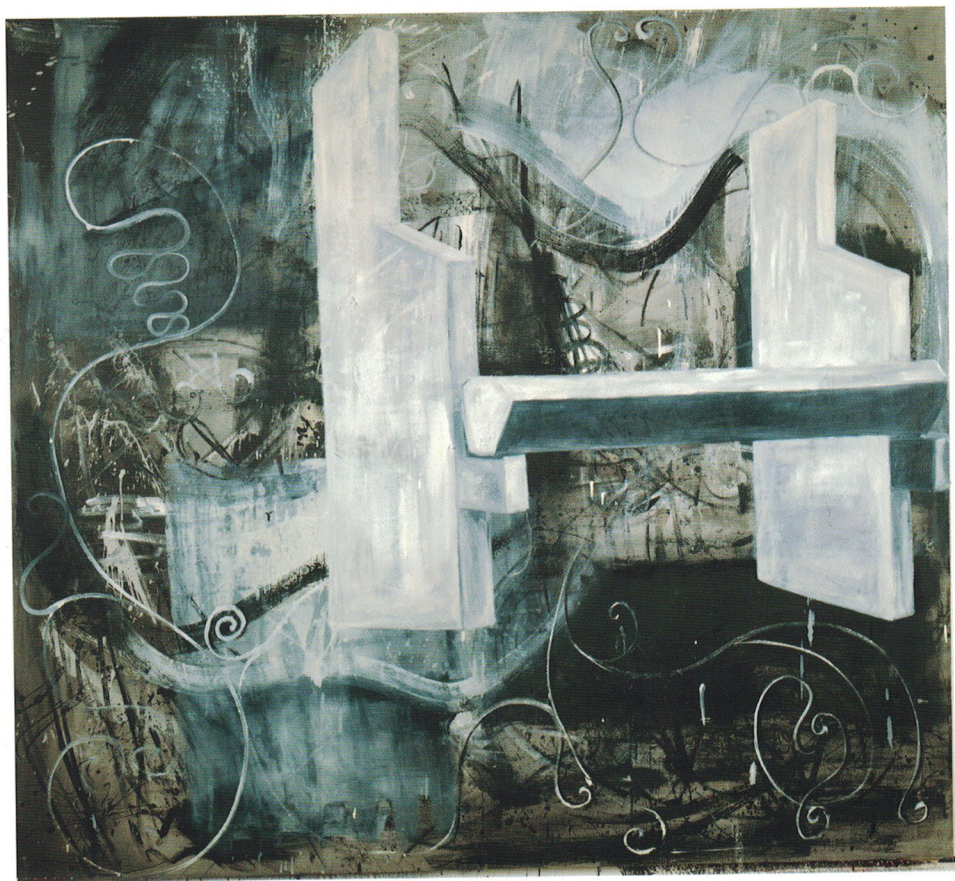
After I finished my film degree, I started to paint again – this was in 1981 – and I started to have shows, of ‘female art’. I wanted to emphasize that because there was something in my head – this idea that women can’t paint – that came from outside, so I addressed it by mixing the art of the prostitutes in St. Pauli, the Hamburg red-light district, with painting. The poses they made combined with *Expressionism*, like Salomé and Fetting with a feminist take. Then I went back to Immdorff’s class for half a year because he was a guest professor. Then, after I did my exam in 1981-82, I was in his class – I started to show, I broke up with Albert and moved to Cologne – and Cologne was like the New York for art then.

**TB:** Lüpertz told us that there was a real hunger for painting amongst collectors for painting then and things sold...

**BS:** Like hotcakes. Except for the females. I showed in 1986 with Maureen Paley, she came to Hamburg to see my work *German Catastrophes*. I was working with press archives. I then moved to London and did the *Goldsmiths* MA course.

**TB:** They are very filmic – were you making films then too?

**BS:** Not simultaneously, no. I stopped



**Construction**

1986  
Oil on canvas  
200 x 160 cm

Courtesy of the artist

after college. I had done some 16mm films. These paintings were to integrate reality into the medium, mostly black and white, taking the medium seriously, Film as film, painting as painting – that was a parallel – both of them took a piece of reality and incorporated it into the medium, but the medium was also present as a medium, so I wasn’t just documenting a reality by painting. I was, for example, using splashes of oil on the painting; in the disaster painting of the Munich Olympic Games, I was using splashes like an abstraction, sort of like Warhol’s *Piss Paintings*, addressing the medium and making it kind of a piss-take. Splashes of blood happening in the scene.

**TB:** So the paintings were kind of history paintings? What is your take on that? Is it a matter of fact objectivity? Truth to materials?





**Melancholia**  
1980 – 2016  
Mixed media on canvas  
160 x 195 cm

Courtesy of the artist

*This is something I did in 1980, and worked on again a couple of years ago. It was kind of a quote of a ruined landscape from Romanticism – this idea of a world falling apart; of the beauty of the Middle Ages now come to crumble, and then I combined it later with this blob, which for me had something to do with Melancholia by Lars von Trier – the meteorite coming in to crash.*

**BS:** I'm not sure what you are getting at – I was looking for some kind of drama that I would be able to charge the picture with, that I would be able to mirror back something of my own soul. I was brought up in a setting where catastrophe could happen at any moment. My father was involved in the fight against the atomic armaments and the rearmament of Germany, so I was brought up with a fear of atomic war – it could happen anytime – and I didn't understand. I was a small child, but also this was in my biography which made me aware that things can change at any moment – people could drop away or you could be sent away. And in my mind this kind of catastrophic scenario was something that mirrored my soul, not only history. This is why I interrupt, because you are leading to something too removed from me – there is a remove in history, but I wanted to charge the pictures with a drama of my own – I have a disposition that things could get very apocalyptic on a personal

as well as a universal level.

The pictures are to put the viewer on their toes and are saying “Hey! Don't think what you are looking at is something safe, or something that you can take as reality” – it's like the Brechtian *alienation effect* – look here at the border; this is not the image that you see, this is an image of the image.

Here are some old catalogues. Film and montage transported into my painting – in the ones at Maureen's there were images juxtaposed of a girl's face, like the inner movement being brought outside. I just painted images from a film book in a dialectical way. And this was the kind of painting I was doing on the Hamburg art courses, skeletons, skeletons of buildings, wrong buildings – then the red-light district, the posters at clubs, the adverts...

**TB:** Back in the 80s this kind of painting was just becoming visible in the art magazines in the UK. I was trying to read German art magazines to find out more. There was a kind of



incomprehension of this aesthetic in the UK art schools in the 80s – like it was so satirical – *Expressionist* but with an ironical distance that was hard to parse – they were like “*Why would you do something that you don’t mean?*” You must just mean it and you are a crazy person – when really it was a drama, really dramatic – there were no tools to explain or conceptualise it – it was funny work.

**BS:** That context has to be invented first. Some of the Hamburg tutors in painting were like that as well and this is why I could not keep going in.

This is a building gone wrong – where there is no door or window to the balcony – and this is a picture of a clichéd artist in Paris. [laughter]

**TB:** And this is poured varnish?

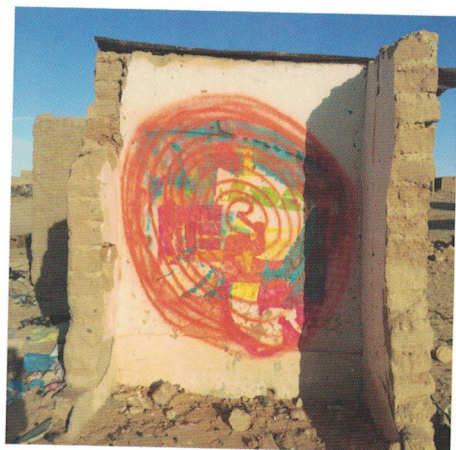
**BS:** This is a painting of someone from the picture archive that I worked on – he had won a prize for the biggest cabbage – and I couldn’t show it – it was taken down from the exhibition as the authorities thought that it was too much like the prime minister of Bavaria at the time – I couldn’t show it!

**TB:** So we’ve been focussing on your history, but how do you see your work now? I know that you’ve been visiting Western Sahara regularly and have been working on a new body of paintings that you showed in Seville recently in which you are working using images from Internet dating sites. Is that a similar putting reality into painting that you mentioned earlier?

**BS:** Western Sahara is dubbed the last colony, a country in the Maghreb occupied by Morocco since 1975. The murals that I have been making in both the refugee camps and the liberated territory, are a form of addressing a reality that needs changing, so I’m taking an activist’s stance, if you will. By pure luck and privilege, I am placed into a historical moment in which, as an artist, I’m asked to make an intervention – to transform, or to be a speaker for the situation not only to an international

audience, but also to the Sahrawi people who invited the artists. So I chose to reference situations that people there can relate to – the missing persons, or a recently famous singer of resistance representing Sahrawi culture – and I painted large murals with bright colours. I believe in context-driven directness while, at the same time, being in touch with the people and their voice. For me one of the best comments on my art ever was by a woman who passes by the *Hommage to Mariem Hassan* every day. She said that it uplifts her spirits to see this symbol of female strength and resistance on her way to work.

In my series about online dating, *The Downloaded Man*, profile pictures and messages are entwined to form hybrid portraits of men. The sexual is characterized as power play, which is why I used Oscar Wilde’s saying “*Everything in Life is About Sex, Except Sex. Sex is About Power*” as a title for my show in Seville in 2018. The most profane and widespread way of picturing oneself – the selfie, or more specifically, the mirror selfie – is shown as a fragmented and commodified identity. Gestures of the people portrayed in the images transform into painterly gestures. In this series, a deadpan repetition of these found images and texts – reality in the readymade tradition – is filtered through the body as painting machine and turns into satire.



**Wall(s) of Shame**

2017

Wall mural at Boujdour  
Said Sahrawi refugee camp  
Algeria

*This mural of 2017 is dispersed and spread throughout Boujdour, in Said Sahrawi refugee camps, where the rainfalls of 2015 have destroyed many of the adobe houses leaving only single walls standing. On these walls of ruins, some more some less isolated, I have sprayed symbolic walls of various origins. Gaza, the Trump wall, and of course the infamous sand berm Morocco has erected to keep its illegally occupied territory. By comparing and overlapping these, they lose specificity and become an abstract which takes away their danger, threat, and historic meaning. This is a process common to contemporary art which makes precarious situations a consumable commodity.*