

Gebremedhin Thomas, 'Q&A With Artist Johannes Kahrs on His Evocative New Solo Exhibition'. [www.wsj.com](http://www.wsj.com), 17 March 2017.

## THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

### Q&A With Artist Johannes Kahrs on His Evocative New Solo Exhibition

The German photorealist's solo exhibition 'embrace' opens today at Luhring Augustine in New York



Johannes Kahrs, *Untitled (am strand)*, 2016 © Johannes Kahrs; Courtesy of the artist, Luhring Augustine, New York, and Zeno X Gallery, Antwerp

By

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March 17, 2017 11:08 a.m. ET

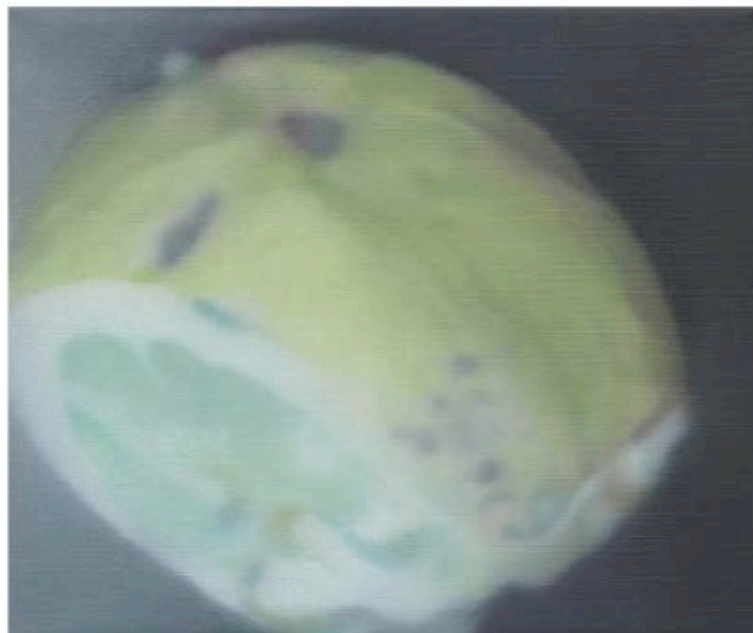
The subjects of Johannes Kahrs's disquieting, visceral paintings reverberate with traces of their source material, typically film stills or photographs extracted from popular culture, media and the artist's own collections. The German artist translates otherwise commonplace images to canvas by manipulating their scale and perspective and offering them without context. The resulting works may at first suggest something familiar—an embrace between lovers or a slab of butcher's meat—but retain enough ambiguity

that they invite reinterpretations and narrative questioning. Recent paintings, which often depict flesh, are exquisitely rendered in cool or warm tones, their subjects blurred and shrouded in shadow, as disorienting as a dream.

WSJ. spoke with Kahrs via email from Berlin ahead of his show embrace, at Luhring Augustine—his third with the gallery—in New York City, which opens on March 18.

**Every generation of artists seems to establish its own visual presentation or style. The late-80s and early-90s saw the arrival of digital art and Toyism, for instance, as well as the emergence of the Young British Artists (YBAs). You attended Hochschule der Künste, an art institute in Berlin, in your late twenties. What kind of art were your cohorts drawn to?**

I studied in West Berlin before the wall fell. At that time, the city was an island in all respects, including art. There was no market for art, no galleries, nothing. It was so narrow-minded, a reality that seems impossible today—it was the eighties! There was a specific Berlin subculture: raw, dark, punk, opposition. But the teachers, who were often there at Hochschule for a decade, were not interested. [At Hochschule] it was mostly figurative, expressive, or abstract painting. Our theoretical classes ended at Cezanne and Matisse, maybe Kirchner. Only one professor taught contemporary art, mainly what was exhibited in Cologne or Düsseldorf, which I thought was very boring, too formal and clean.



Johannes Kahrs, *Untitled (lemon)*, 2013 © *Johannes Kahrs*; *Courtesy of the artist, Luhring Augustine, New York, and Zeno X Gallery, Antwerp*

In 1995, I saw some of the YBAs for the first time. I went with a friend to Saatchi Gallery in London. Man, the glorification of the works, the size of the projects, the representation of the most intimate of situations, the use of film and other footage, it all shocked me. In a way it was already a glimpse of what was to come later with social media. It was so consumable, trendy, sparkling, and the way it attacked society seemed very British. I thought, 'We never get to be shown in this way'. London was glamour, in Berlin it was *tristesse*. But, actually, what we Berliners did not realize then was that we were being left undisturbed, free to work our own way.



Johannes Kahrs, *Untitled (embrace)*, 2015 Photo: © Johannes Kahrs; Courtesy of the artist, Luhring Augustine, New York, and Zeno X Gallery, Antwerp.



**Did you initially experiment with different mediums? Did you find that you produced more naturally in any one form?**

Yes, video and sound pieces. I was especially interested in sound. There was so much going on with music at that time. I had friends experimenting with field recordings, or the sound of their own bodies, or recording the U-Bahn and displaying it on TV at night. I played around with endless tapes and VHS, which I found more direct and fast than the digital process that started soon thereafter. But I started moving away from video and sound because it took too much time away from painting, which suited me.

**Who were some of the artists that influenced you early on? Were they painters?**

It changes. Yes, probably painters, but also photographers like Saul Leiter. I was so surprised by his photos, which he initially intended to paint. It's a certain distance he keeps—which is similar to my own distance—the way he cropped the photos, the colors. I was also very much influenced by Larry Clark's photographic series *Tulsa*. Not so much the photos themselves, but by his presentation of this hidden drama, which was tender, lost, violent, sad, direct. Bruce Naumann, too. Felix Gonzales-Torres. Cady Noland. Bacon, often. Celmins.



Johannes Kahrs, *Untitled (meat)*, 2016 Photo: © Johannes Kahrs; Courtesy of the artist, Lühring Augustine, New York, and Zeno X Gallery, Antwerp.

**Can you recall the first work of art that you felt proud of as an artist?**

Every time I finish something, without revising, I'm satisfied. But I often get timid during the process and correct my 'mistakes.' I might paint too long over a certain section because it doesn't look good or feels uninspired. Then the paint starts to dry and the problems begin and the whole thing collapses. In the studio I often feel frustrated, like nothing is happening. It's good to see the works in another room, other surroundings—it clears you from your own thoughts and doubts.

**Do you set aside some time each day to work? Do you keep a strict schedule?**

I'm not strict, but I work every day. I start around 5 pm, when all else is settled—cooking, shopping, reading, all of

it. I need to focus and get everything distracting out of my head. Even sounds distract me. When it's too quiet, I turn on music, very loud, because music is so much better than all the sounds from traffic, print shops, people talking on phones, which all floats into the studio from the courtyard. Then I can work.

**What do you do when you can't make something work?**

I try it again, and then when that does not work, I try it again.

**Aside from other visual art and artists, what influences your work?**

Photos (newspapers, magazines, books, internet, photo-albums, etc.), films, ads, people, gestures, the way people move, walk, sit, sleep, talk, look, eat. Also animals, birds, dogs, pigeons, hawks, sparrows, spiders, cars, trees, houses, clouds—what I see.

**Can you define what a good work of art should do?**

I don't know what a good work of art "should" do, but it has to somehow electrify and stimulate something inside of me. It should confront and also liberate, produce a sense that "Ah, it can be done this way? How wonderful." There is also something I cannot describe: When I went to the Prado [in Madrid] to look at paintings of Velasquez and Goya, some were so beautiful that I did not want to leave the room because, immediately after I left, I had already forgotten the paintings, the details, the brushstrokes—in front of a painting, you could see the process, but it can only be experienced in front of the paint. You can't replicate the magic of a moment, and why would you want to? You create new moments.

**Can you remember the first time that you were truly moved by a work of art?**

When I was a child, in the seventies, I remember visiting the Übersee-Museum in Bremen. It was not renovated then and they displayed artifacts from overseas relating to colonialism without any sense of political correctness. I remember the display of an African family in front of a clay hut: a woman cooking, children, and a man. They looked so real. I was fascinated because I could come so close, but they just kept staring into nothing. Then there was the Museum of Archeology in Naples—not one work, but thousands, especially the Greek vases. And the petrified dogs in Pompei. Recently I bought a great catalog of Mike Kelley—The Uncanny. Both the book and the project really moved me.

**What do you think is the responsibility of artists politically? Do they have an obligation to respond to what's happening "out there," out in the world?**

No, they don't. They can, and some do, but it's not obligatory. Art can be great or beautiful without addressing political issues. But if you create something, a work of art, then it innately stands in opposition

to everything else and I feel that is in some way a form of protest. But, in many countries, even this is not possible because it is dangerous [to create art], so when artists pursue art in these conditions the work becomes highly political.



Johannes Kahrs, *Untitled (lover)*, 2016 Photo: © Johannes Kahrs; Courtesy of the artist, Lurhing Augustine, New York, and Zeno X Gallery, Antwerp.

**Your new show at Lurhing Augustine Gallery is entirely new work. I am particularly struck by *Untitled (lover)* and *Untitled (meat)*—can you tell me how those two came about?**

For *untitled (lover)* I photographed an image of a man on my friend's cellphone. When I painted it I changed the position so that what originally looked like a man sleeping, somehow looked like a man praying or clasping his hands and the pillow became a sort of religious hat. I worked on the piece, trying to make the body softer, like wax and illuminated.

*Untitled (meat)* came about after I bought a piece of lamb to cook. I think I ordered it from a farmer. It was wrapped in paper, which somehow looked like laces around it. Laces with light pink dots. It was bigger than I imagined and it lay there and had this physical impact.

**Do you ever find yourself thinking about how an audience will react to your work? Are they ever in the back of your mind? Or was this ever a consideration for you as a young artist?**

Yes, I have always been apprehensive of the audience, about their reaction. I love the work when it's in the

studio. I love the colors, contrasts, softness, darkness, and narration. But all that is lost for me when the work is made public. I feel vulnerable. It is difficult to take critique, even a critical look. There is a deep feeling that it is not good enough, not worth it, but that is another story. I would love to do what the artist On Kawara did—he went fishing instead of attending his openings.