

For the first time, the KUNSTHALLE WIEN PRIZE 2021 ↗ showcases the work of eight recent art school graduates. What does this political move towards a collective prize exhibition format tell us about the Kunsthalle's response to the art world's trend of foregrounding collective working processes since the late 2010s? And what aesthetic statement does the show make in light of the increased digital experiences during the pandemic?

This year is the first time that a seven-headed jury, almost unanimously, selected two prize winners — DIANA BARBOSA GIL ↗ (University of Applied Arts) and ANNA SPANLANG ↗ (Academy of Fine Arts) — alongside six other nominees, who graduated from Vienna's two art universities last year, to be exhibited at the Kunsthalle Wien 2021 prize show. The Kunsthalle's PRESS IMAGES ↗ of the show, curated by Anne Faucheret, present the eight artists standing together, as a group, but also apart. The show gives visibility to a heterogenous group of artists, instead of

showcasing only the two winners. A critique of individualism implied, »Handspells« breaks with myths of solo prize formats. Its institutional politics presents the nominees and winners in the form of a quasi-collective, showcasing Vienna art schools' top league graduates of 2021.

Read as a gesture of collectivity, produced in the extremely socially isolating times of the pandemic, the innovative exhibition format of the prize operates in line with the art world's recent political move to employ collectives rather than individuals since the late 2010s. In the preface to a recent issue on collectivity, the editors of *Texte zur Kunst* draw attention to the crux implied in the incorporation of artistic collectives in art institutions. Katharina Hausladen and Genevieve Lipinsky de Orlov note that »the idealization of collectivity [...] runs the risk of not acknowledging real hierarchies, dependencies, envy, competition, and conflicts of interests, thereby legitimizing the privilege of individuals under the guise of collectivity.¹

On first sight, the heterogenous aesthetics of the collectively staged prize-winning exhibition brings the word eclectic to mind; but on second sight, Faucheret's curatorial care devoted to the work of Diana Barbosa Gil, Cho Beom-Seok, JOJO GRONOSTAY ↗, ANI GURASHVILI ↗, LUKAS KAUFMANN ↗, Anna Spanlang, NORA SEVERIOS ↗, and CHIN TSAO ↗

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to feed on material tactility. As the exhibition's description text states:

Holding, scratching, making, drawing, writing, folding, weaving, stroking, touching, but also reading with fingers, speaking with hands, are crossing the artworks presented,

*more or less literally, more or less visible.*²

Among the works foregrounding material experiences, through their artistic techniques, are: Lukas Kaufmann's large, almost entirely black, language prints and drawings; Chin Tsao's pastel colour ceramics, her acyclic Cy Twombly-like colour drawings on cotton surfaces; Ani Gurashvili's surrealist paintings of mythical non-human creatures and animals; Nora Severios's fur animals, glued onto a beige fabric support; Jojo Gronostay's worn and left pairs of jeans of his fashion label Dead White Men's Clothes; and Diana Barbosa Gil's large, vertically installed reddish abstract painting, with silver objects attached, fills the center of the exhibition space.

A small selection of new media works is also included. Anna Spanlang's winning documentary video work, »CEREAL / Soy Claudia, soy Esther y soy Teresa. Soy Ingrid, soy Fabiola y soy Valeria« (2021), features digital image footage. Spanlang shot it with her mobile phone camera before and during the pandemic. Her video is displayed together with Sunny Pfalzer's soft seating sculptures in front. Two other digital artworks are by Tsao. Alongside the ceramic works, she also exhibits digital language slogans and the video work »The Land of Promise«, and Cho Beom-Seok show two black-and-white still from his film »Prägung« [Imprint]. The unspectacular inclusion of new media works in the object-focused group exhibition breaks the aesthetic spell that both, delicately handmade, spatially installed physical objects, as well as new media works often project if they are over-theatrically installed.

The exhibition title stresses Faucheret's curatorial aesthetic approach as a response to the subsuming digital working conditions: »Handspells«'s combination of materially and digitally produced works of

art refers to the normative entanglement of the physical and abstract world in our digitalised contemporary culture. The selected artists' choice to make mainly sculptural art objects during the pandemic and exhibit them in the show makes, however, a strong point for the haptic power of the physical material over the medially projected digital world. The interdependency between handmade and technologically produced *things* represents, like the curatorial practice of the exhibition itself, a form of being in touch. Bodies are always present, but their interactivity and closeness differ according to the media used.

The question concerning the application of the human body and its material objects within the social relations of the art world also links to ethical concerns of care. While aesthetic analysis applies to works of art, ethics concerns the agency and intersubjectivity of the makers, thus, the base structure of artistic work. For Rosi Braidotti, ethics is »related to the physics and the biology of bodies. That means that it deals with the question of what exactly a body can do and how much a body can take.«³ And it is also, Braidotti notes, »the key to social accountability and responsive citizenship. This constitutes a break from the reduction of 'care' to the private realm reserved for women, as something 'below' politics'« and cannot »be neutral«⁴.

If the prize exhibition, as a whole, is read as a performative gesture, making a claim for the potency of physical materiality and collective exhibition designs, then the curatorial care work and its ethical approach under the challenging, two-dimensional, disembodied working conditions of the pandemic is key to make sense of the Kunsthalle Preis Wien 2021 show. The heterogeneity of the artists, graduating from both Vienna-based art schools, is the driving force of the prize

exhibition; but its focus on physical artworks, in dialogue with digital works, interweaves their distinct approaches.

Nora Severios’s installation, »Schulen über der Erde« [Airs above the Ground, 2021], placed in the centre of the exhibition space, draws particular attention to the ideological fragility of group shows. Thin strings, she made out of stinging nettle in a tedious production process, are attached to pastel-coloured ceramic forms which mimic the shape of horse tail bandages. Her room filling string installation visually alludes to existing naturalised hierarchies that hinge between individual-collective and physical-digital cultural means of production. Enmeshed in cultural politics and hybrid contemporary working conditions, the prize show’s natural materials, and Severios’s animal figures in particular, gesture towards the socio-ecological potentiality of collectively shaped cultural realms in a performatively newly ordered, post-pandemic societal constellation.

¹ Katharina Hausladen and Genevieve Lipinsky de Orlov, »Preface«, in: Texte zur Kunst: Collectivity, December 2021, p. 4.

²

A Material Gesture of Collectivity. »Handspells. Kunsthalle Wien Prize 2021«

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³ Rosi Braidotti, »Transpositions: On

Nomadic Ethic«, Cambridge University Press, p. 129.

⁴ Ibid, p. 119

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