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Frankfurt's Städel Revisits 1980s Figurative Painting in West Germany



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Rainer Fetting, "First Painting of the Wall", 1977 (detail)
(Städel Museum, Frankfurt am Main. Photo: Städel Museum – ARTOTHEK © Rainer Fetting)

The 1980s feature prominently in German exhibitions this summer. While Munich's Haus der Kunst is putting a focus on the avant-garde 1980s music scenes with its exhibition "Geniale Dilletanten", Frankfurt's Städel Museum is revisiting the diverse and highly creative generation of the "Wild Youths" or "Neo Expressionists," as they are sometimes referred to: artists like [Martin Kippenberger](#), Albert and [Markus Oehlen](#), or [Rainer Fetting](#) who redefined figurative painting with unprecedented vigor and diversity.

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It is the first major survey of 1980s figurative painting from West Germany since 2003, when the ZKM in Karlsruhe presented its extensive group survey “Obsessive Painting.” Similarly to the Karlsruhe venture, the show at Städel aims to “reassess and perceive anew” the “painterly potency and complexity” of this period, as the Städel’s director Max Hollein recently stated.

Though extremely successful on the art market at the time, the 1980s West German painters continue to hold a somewhat unclear position within the art historical canon. Determined to depart from concept art and minimalism, as well as postwar painting in the vein of older peers such as [Georg Baselitz](#), [Gerhard Richter](#), and [Sigmar Polke](#), they did share some characteristics with earlier movements such as German Expressionism, Surrealism, or the French Fauves whom contemporary critics readily associated them with.

The movement developed simultaneously in a number of German regions, most prominently Cologne and Dusseldorf, Hamburg, and West-Berlin, then in the midst of the Cold War and heavily influenced by the Punk and New Wave music scenes which also seeped into the work of artists such as Salomé and [Luciano Castelli](#) who eventually began to collaborate as musicians and painters. Similarly, [Martin Kippenberger](#) who had studied in Hamburg before moving to Berlin not only organized various group exhibitions that brought together a heterogeneous spectrum of sujets and styles, but also managed the legendary Berlin nightclub SO36 from 1979 on.

The Frankfurt exhibition is structured both geographically and thematically, highlighting important art centers from the Mülheimer Freiheit in Cologne, a studio shared by Hans Perer Adamski, Peter Bömmels, [Walter Dahn](#), Jiří Georg Dokoupil, [Gerard Kever](#), and Gerhard Naschberger, to the Galerie am Moritzplatz in Berlin’s Kreuzberg district, founded by the so called “Moritz boys” [Rainer Fetting](#), [Helmut Middendorf](#), Salomé, and [Bernd Zimmer](#) in 1977.

One of the most distinctive features of West German figurative painting in the 1980s —and its predominantly male representatives — is its stylistic pluralism and rawness, ranging from

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explorations of color-field painting as in [Bernd Zimmer](#)'s landscapes or [Rainer Fetting](#)'s concentrated studies of the Berlin wall to Salomé's aggressively gestural homoerotic scenes. Paintings like Albert Oehlen's "Self Portrait with Palette" (1984) seem to formally question traditional genres, others, such as [Martin Kippenberger](#)'s "With the Best Will in the World, I Can't See a Swastika" (1984) or Dokoupil's "Star in Distress" (1982) reference and deconstruct political symbols and their subtexts; particularly the artists collaborating in Cologne's Mühlheimer Freiheit studio cultivated a deliberately aestheticized dilettantism as exemplified in [Walter Dahn](#)'s edgy "The Birth of the Mühlheimer Freiheit" (1981), while other painters such as [Helmut Middendorf](#) were interested in the aesthetics of various subcultures he portrayed in works like his boldly colored and schematic painting "Electric Night" (1979).

"What we are dealing with here is a generation of artists who, in a clearly defined period, triggered a tremendously controversial response with the sheer vehemence of their presence and the novelty of their painting," Martin Engler, head of the Städel's collection of contemporary art and curator of the exhibition explains, alluding to the fact that this period of German art continues to receive mixed critical reactions. The Frankfurt show thus is also an attempt to revisit its art without "the spectacles of traditional clichés," as Max Hollein puts it and to newly define its characteristics from an art historical point of view.

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