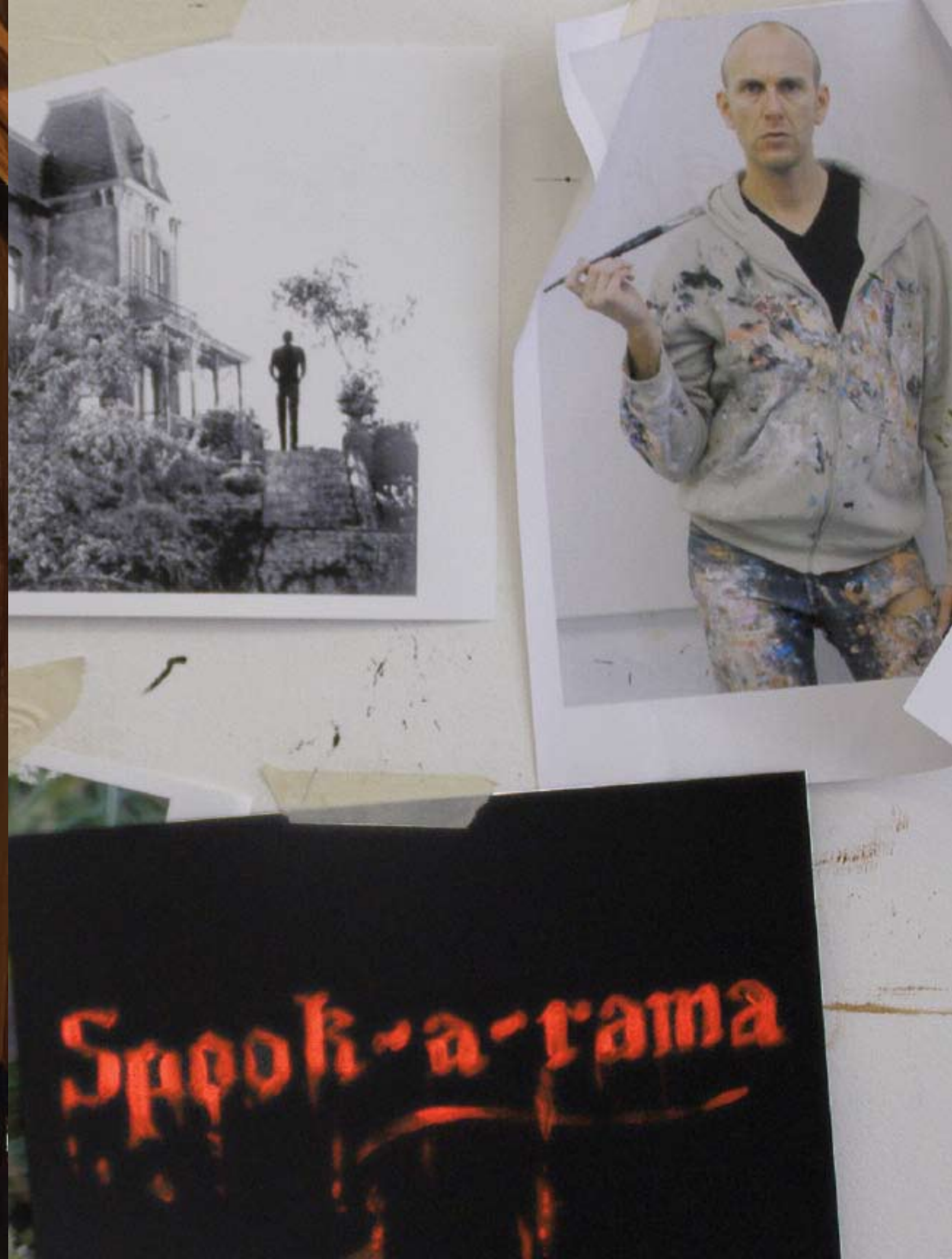




# Spook-a-rama

Christopher Winter







Jungle, 2008.  
Acrylic on canvas, 11 3/4 x 11 3/4 inches.

## Spooked By Art: Christopher Winter's Germania

by Donald Kuspit

“We must be off now,” said Hansel, “and get out of this bewitched forest.”

—“Hansel and Grethel,” Grimm's Fairy Tales I

“Haven't I proved conclusively that ghosts don't have ordinary feet—? But here you're dancing like mortals!... I'll not put up with this spectral despotism.”

—The Proctophantasmist in Goethe's Faust, Part I <sup>3</sup>



There they are, the pretty little girl sitting on the branch of a “bonetree,” eating an apple and staring at us, without fear and without fear of falling, and there they are, the eyes of a little boy staring at us from a *Jungle* of green leaves. The theme seems to be *Us and Them*, to refer to the title of another of Winter’s witty paintings: the children in the proverbially dark German forest full of sinister white *Bonetrees*, evoking the thought of death, and the adults outside the forest—the adults, as the fairytale of Hansel and Grethel tells us, who abandoned them in it. Have they finally died in it, as their stepmother wanted them to: are we looking at their ghosts? They are certainly spooky—oddly ghoulish, however much they look like comic book characters. But then comic strips are full of ghostly figures—phantoms of the popular imagination. They’re fairy tales for the masses, the collective dream of the collective unconscious. Universal truths take comic form these populist days; the unconscious, after all, is pretty democratic.

the children in the proverbially dark German forest full of sinister white *Bonetrees*, **evoking the thought of death**, and the adults outside the forest—the adults, as the fairytale of Hansel and Grethel tells us, who abandoned them in it.

Winter, a British artist living in Berlin, has another kind of Germanic themed picture: alongside his Hansel and Grethel pictures, as I want to call them, are his Mister Artist paintings, as they can be called: *Mr. Dürer*, *Mr. Kippenberger*, *Mr. Picasso*. (All works 2008.) The 16th century Dürer is generally regarded as the greatest German artist ever; famous for his innovative woodcuts, etchings, self-portraits, and universal knowledge—a true Renaissance artist. Kippenberger, another all-around German artist, was self-destructive in the best “modern genius” tradition, brilliantly described by R. D. Laing as the ability to plunge the depths but not return from them. As Nietzsche wrote, if you look into the abyss the abyss will look into you. Picasso is of course the most legendary and innovative of all 20th century artists, renowned especially for his creation of Cubism and, like Dürer and Kippenberger, his relentless output in every medium. Picasso is not German, but like Winter’s German artists his art overflows with fantasy.

Winter shrouds these artists in white sheets, as though they were graveyard ghosts. They’re dead but not buried by history—their art lives on. But they also may be alive, for they peer at us with one eye—two in Picasso’s case—

suggesting they’re as conscious of us as we are of them. It’s the same hide and seek, I see you and you see me, us and them game that’s played in the Hansel and Grethel paintings. It affirms the old idea that the artist is emotionally a child and “the child is the greatest imaginer,” as Kandinsky said. More pointedly, Winter’s paintings are about the unhappy



Bone Trees, 2008. Acrylic on canvas, 78 3/4 x 106 1/4 inches.

relationship of the artist and his audience: their ironical intimacy, not to say voyeuristic misunderstanding—neither truly “sees” let alone seriously “gets” the other. The artist is the insider, peering at us from the shelter of his sheet, or a sort of sinister child—the little girl with her ominous black umbrella in *Gothic* makes this clear—while the audience is on the outside, looking at the artist, and his art, with little appreciation let alone understanding, although, no doubt, with some amusement.

Hansel and Grethel are painters, and as such surrogates for Winter. Indeed, they’re rather “chilling”—as cold as



death, as *Little Vampire* suggests. In *Face Painting*, with its allusion to Courbet's portrayal of himself as *The Desperate Man*, 1844-45 confronting us with his madness, Hansel's face is smeared with paint, as though camouflaged to blend into the jungle. The artist's madness, however make-believe—an act put on to call attention to himself—is a sub-theme of Winter's paintings. The black spectres behind *Mr. Kippenberger* and *Mr. Picasso* suggests their madness—their grim inner life, as it were, projected as a menacing shadow. The shadows have a sort of comic creepy look—they literally creep up on the artist—but they have to be taken seriously, for they have a presence of their own. They are the artist's alter ego, the negative identity that is the source of his creativity. Our shadow side is our creative potential, as Jung says, and when it realizes itself in art, it often does so at the expense of our social identity, which is the tragedy of being an artist: is that another reason Winter's artists are faceless ghosts—socially anonymous, and tragicomic, like all ghosts?

The finger *Mr. Picasso* points to his head acknowledges his madness—the creative madness that makes him an artistic genius. Creativity is a species of madness, Winter suggests, and extreme madness becomes

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artistic creativity. But *Mr. Picasso* is just a child playing at being the ghost of Picasso, even as it suggests that Picasso was just a child playing at art. He suggested as much when he said that it took him a lifetime to learn to make art like a child. It's the same inner child—probably a boy, but perhaps also a girl—that we see in

Winter's Hansel and Grethel paintings, suggesting that it's Winter's inner child, that is, the creative child that's painted his ghost story pictures. However silly they may seem, and however clearly make-believe, as *Scary Movie* and *Psycho Hopper* make clear, there is something scary—"Gothic"—about them, just as there is about the haunted house from Hitchcock's horror film. (It is worth noting that the psychotic hero is a performance artist, as his use of wigs and his installation of his dead mother in the basement—a very Edgar Allan Poe thing to do—suggests.)

There is something disturbing about a child pretending to be a ghost, which is to pretend to be dead when one is just beginning life. Who exactly is he or she and why is s/he hiding behind a sheet—playing ghost? Or is s/he scared—



Ghost Training: Mr. Picasso, 2008. Acrylic on canvas, 51 1/4 x 43 1/4 inches.

ness. Certainly a bloodsucking child vampire—we were all little vampires when we were milksuckers—is a symbol of psychotic madness. We laugh a scary movie off when it is over but it wasn't laughable when we were watching it.

In *Les Enfants*, with its allusion to the scar-like striations on the mask-like faces in Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger*, 1908, Grethel is aggressively painting Hansel's face, which becomes an African mask. She's finished the job in *The Last Painter*—there's Courbet's crazy stare again (maybe it's for real, not just an act designed to afford a "shock of the new")—and in *Flycatcher*, where his open mouth waits for flies (viewers?) to swallow: Hansel's face has become a wild painterly mask, suggesting he's gone expressionistically mad. I couldn't help thinking of the malevolent children in William Golding's

afraid of going mad? Is making art a way of *Singing in the Dark*, as a child does to comfort itself and contain its fear? Like every child, the artist is afraid of the darkness within himself or herself, and of the ghosts s/he see in the darkness: singing about them—making them into art—makes them less threatening, even as it acknowledges the reality of their existence. The engulfing darkness is an expression of what Donald Winnicott called "unthinkable anxiety"—the anxiety that made Cézanne important for Picasso, the anxiety (Angst) that informs German Expressionist art, the anxiety in which avant-garde art begins, ultimately the anxiety of being unable to create (something new and original), and thus of always being "in the dark." Winter's pictures may be as entertaining as a Hollywood horror film, but they, like it—like *Psycho* especially—are existentially powerful, for they depict psychotic mad-





Les Enfants d'Avignon, 2008. Acrylic on canvas, 51 1/4 x 90 1/2 inches.

Winter's self-portraits as savage child reminded me of Rainer Fetting's *Self-Portrait as Indian*, 1982, one of the key works of the Berlin *Neue Wilden* ("New Savages"), the late 20th century renewal of German "instinctive" painting—**recklessly dynamic expressionistic painting, more pointedly**, insanely excited and nightmarish visionary painting.

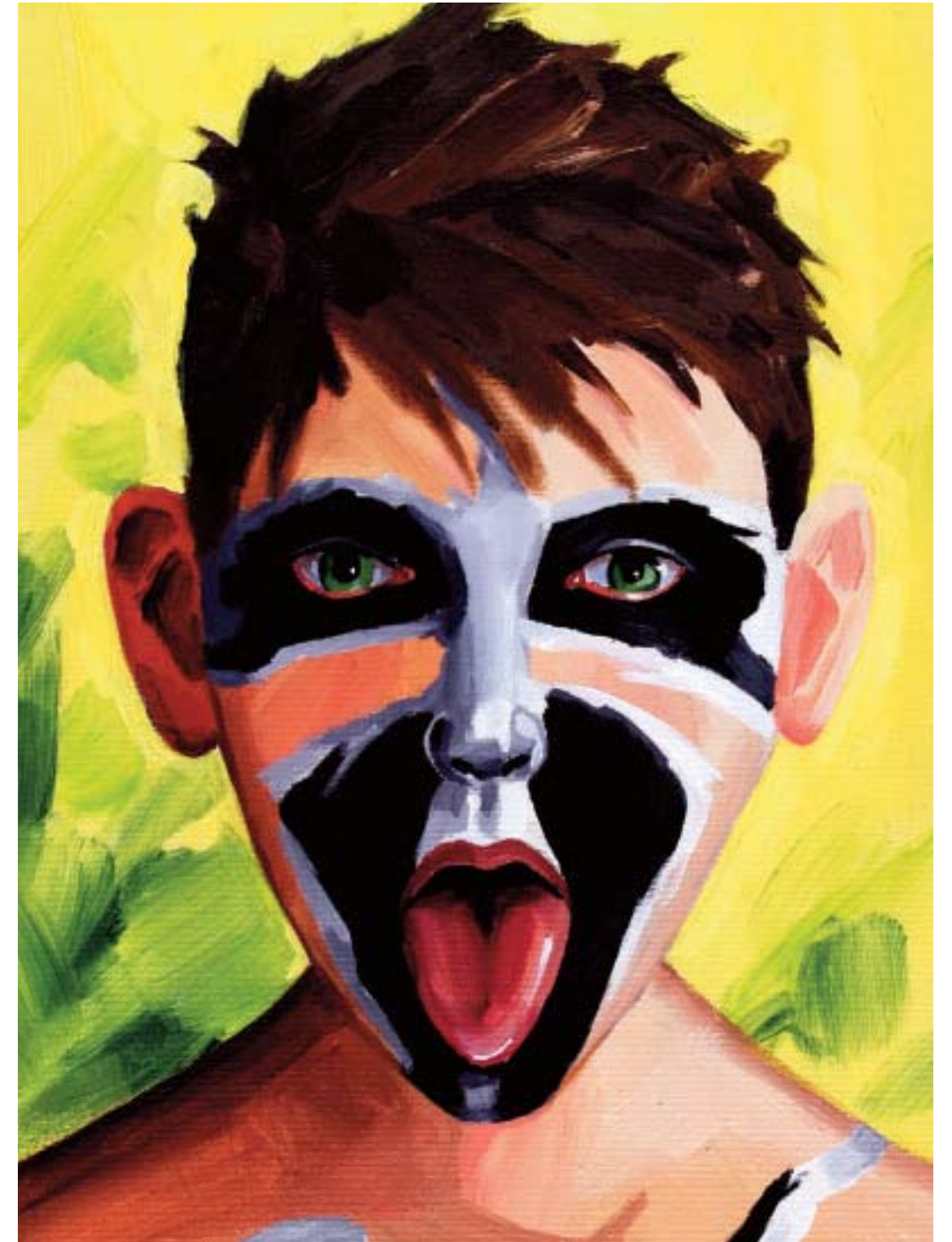
*The Lord of the Flies*, painting their faces like savages—like the "savages" in Picasso's *Demoiselles*—suggesting that to be an artist is to regress to childhood sadism (like the *Flycatcher*). Golding's children were bewitched—under the spell of the forest jungle—and so are Winter's, as *Day Trippers* makes clear; for only witches can levitate.

Picasso called *Les Demoiselles* his "first canvas of exorcism," remarking that the "ghastly...masks" that inspired the work were "magical things," defenses "against unknown, threatening spirits," inhabiting "the unconscious" and fraught with "emotion." For Winter, representation is also exorcism: he purges the spirits that threaten him from within—spirits that signify emotions out of control, and thus "expressionistically" or "madly" exaggerated—by making them artistically

visible, which is to bring them to consciousness and thus under control. They remain frightening, but one can face them without flinching. It is a game or playacting, and thus as funny as it is fearful—fear acted out in a funny artistic way. But isn't *Les Demoiselles* also terrifying comic theater—Grand Guignol rather than Hollywood theater? In the former puppets are actors, in the latter actors are puppets; they're all performers, convincing even as we see through them. I am saying that there are elements of Winter's paintings which are as dramatic and uncanny as Picasso's painting, however different their "primitive" style.

Winter's self-portraits

as savage child reminded me of Rainer Fetting's *Self-Portrait as Indian*, 1982, one of the key works of the Berlin *Neue Wilden* ("New Savages"), the late 20th century renewal of German "instinctive" painting—recklessly dynamic expressionistic painting, more pointedly, insanely excited and nightmarish visionary painting. Some see the *Neue Wilden* as the last gasp of early 20th century German Expressionism, I see it as a convincing demonstration of the emotional power—subjective verisimilitude—uniquely possible with expressionistic means. Hansel's savagely painted face also turns him into a wild Indian—in effect a *Neue Wilden* painter. They're mad painters, and their paintings are defiant screams, as Kokoschka said an expressionist painting should be, and Fetting's colors scream loudly, and his Indian is defiant. Is Winter appropriating the aggressive, confrontational spirit of the *Neue Wilden*, implicitly claiming them, and their German Expressionist predecessors—the



Fly Catcher, 2008. Acrylic on canvas, 15 3/4 x 11 3/4 inches.



avant-garde *Sturm und Drang* art exhibited in Berlin's famous *Sturm* gallery—as his ancestors, now that he's living in Berlin? Is it his way of adapting to Berlin's artistic history and, more broadly, the German artistic environment? Is Winter defiantly taking up the cause of the now passé—some would say extinct—*Neue Wilden*? Certainly the so-called *Deutsche Welle* has had its historical splash.

Or is his painterly boldness his way of saying that painting—especially expressionistic narrative painting—is alive and well however many theorists think it is dead or dying? (Theory gives a final kick to the corpse of painting, as though to show that it can't move.) Not exactly: Winter's painterliness seems more ironical—calculated—than Fetting's. There's an all too knowing faux naïve air to Winter's savage painterliness, just as his children have an all too knowing faux naïve look. Let's recall that Duchamp dismissed expressionist painting as mindlessly “animal.” He mocked—some would say deconstructed (I would say “savaged”)—*painting in Tu m'[erde]*, 1917, his last painting. He wanted painting to deal with ideas not feelings—to be “intellectual” or what we now call conceptual. I think Winter is intellectualizing *Neue Wilden* painting, and

with it the 20th century tradition of “wild painting” made by “mad artist children.” Winter embalms savage expressionism by mimicking it, which pays homage to it while suggesting that it is past history—another style in the pantheon of 20th century avant-garde styles. In other words, it is another period style, and the 20th century avant-garde is another period in art history. Winter is a conceptual painter with a strong streak of reflective irony—black humor?—and a peculiar pathos: the pathos implicit in all painting that openly—and heavily—depends on the past, that is, so-called postmodern appropriation painting.



Unbearable Lightness, 2008. Pencil on paper; 30 x 22 inches.

But there is something deadly serious in Winter's fairy tale paintings: they're after all about death—dead artists and the “black” forest—which is a serious matter. The German mentality seems to be particularly taken with death: not “half in love with death” but totally and blindly in love with it. The barbarism of the Germanic tribes and the sadism of the Nazis suggests as much. Winter has assimilated Germany's fascination with death. After all, an appropriation artist deals with dead art—suggesting that appropriation art is necrophiliac—however much s/he may use its corpse for his or her own intellectual purposes. And, as Winter does, to express the problem he has with art and his own creative difficulties

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Hans Holbein the Younger (1497/8-1543)  
Jean de Dinteville and Georges de Selve ('The Ambassadors'),  
1533. Oil on oak.  
The National Gallery, London

and emotional problems. Nowhere is death more evident in Winter's pictures than in his appropriation of the anamorphic skull in Holbein's *The Ambassadors*, 1543, perhaps the most famously ironic, insidious depiction of death (and its triumph) ever. Looked at from the front, the skull is an obscure apparition—a sort of unclear nightmare—but from the side it shows itself for what it is: a symbol and form of death. Holbein's painting is a tour de force of perspective—a demonstration of the ironies of perception. Winter's skull table—on the one side Holbein's unrecognizably distorted skull, mysterious because it is indirectly represented; on the other side an unmistakable, however

ironically decorative, representation of a death's head—is a masterpiece. Turned upside down, one's perspective on death changes. Winter's table brilliantly conveys the ambiguity with which we approach death: now we see it—if we stand in the right emotional place—now we don't see it, because we're in the wrong place. Winter's tour de force shows us how death turns the table on us. His death table is a thing of morbid beauty, all the more so because the hallucinatory strangeness in the proportions of Holbein's anamorphic skull confirms the adage that there must be something strange (morbid) in the proportions of beauty for it to be truly beautiful. Winter's children artists



are also morbidly beautiful—or at least pretty. Like Holbein’s bizarre skull, they also have an hallucinatory aspect, just as the skull has their fairy tale look. Death haunts life and informs beauty, and it has a long troubling history of haunting both in Germany.

Winter’s appropriation of a reproduction of Dürer’s famous 1500 *Self-Portrait* is another tour de force of anxious dependence on the heroic past, identification with German art and power, and mourning for the refined, eloquent realism that was once the glory of art. Now we have Hollywood comic strip realism, as Winter’s Hansel and Grethel pictures make clear. Dürer’s paint spotted figure, set against an abstract expressionist ground, is a version of the artist’s

**“I have to take into consideration,” Dürer says, “the German mentality. Whoever wants to build something insists on employing a new pattern the like of which has never been seen before.”**

— Quoted in Erwin Panofsky, *The Life and Art of Albrecht Dürer*<sup>3</sup>

melancholy—creative self-doubt—that Panofsky said was represented in Dürer’s allegorical *Melancolia I*. Panofsky argues that Dürer points to himself the way Christ does in his representation as the ruler of the world, but Dürer no longer rules the world of art, however famous he remains—a morbid fate for any great artist. Winter’s fascination with Dürer, one of the famous artists with whom he identifies and pays homage, re-appears, in disguised form, in *The Trophy Tree*: the boy holds his leaf the way Dürer holds the eryngium in his 1493 *Self-Portrait*. The boy has the same sober face that Dürer has in both self-portraits. They were made when Dürer was about the same age that Winter is now, and they helped make Dürer’s fame. Clearly Winter can’t lay to rest the German spooks and artists that haunt him, which is why his works spook us with their concern about the fate of art and the artist.



Albrecht Dürer (1471-1528)  
Self-portrait in Fur Cloak, 1500. Oil on board.  
Alte Pinakothek, Munich  
Photograph: studio of the artist, courtesy of the artist



Ghost Training: Mr. Dürer, 2007.  
Acrylic on canvas, 98 1/2 x 78 3/4 inches.





Ghost Training: Deputy Dog, 2006. Acrylic on canvas, 51 1/4 x 43 1/4 inches.



Ghost Training: Snow White, 2006. Acrylic on canvas, 51 1/4 x 43 1/4 inches.



Ghost Training: Mr. Velazquez, 2007. Acrylic on canvas, 98 1/2 x 78 3/4 inches.



Ghost Training: Mr. Bacon, 2006. Acrylic on canvas, 51 1/4 x 43 1/4 inches.



Ghost Training: Dr. No, 2006  
Acrylic on canvas, 251 1/4 x 43 1/4 inches.





Gustave Courbet (1819–1877)  
Self Portrait, The Desperate Man, 1843-1845. Oil on canvas.  
Private Collection  
Photograph: studio of the artist, courtesy of the artist



The Last Painter...ever, 2008.  
Acrylic on canvas, 39 1/2 x 55 inches.





Birthday Party, 2007.  
Acrylic on canvas, 74 3/4 x 82 3/4 inches.





Day Trippers, 2008. Acrylic on canvas, 67 x 118 inches.





Psycho Hopper, 2008.  
Acrylic on canvas, 23 1/2 x 23 1/2 inches.



Gothic, 2007.  
Acrylic on canvas, 74 3/4 x 74 3/4 inches.



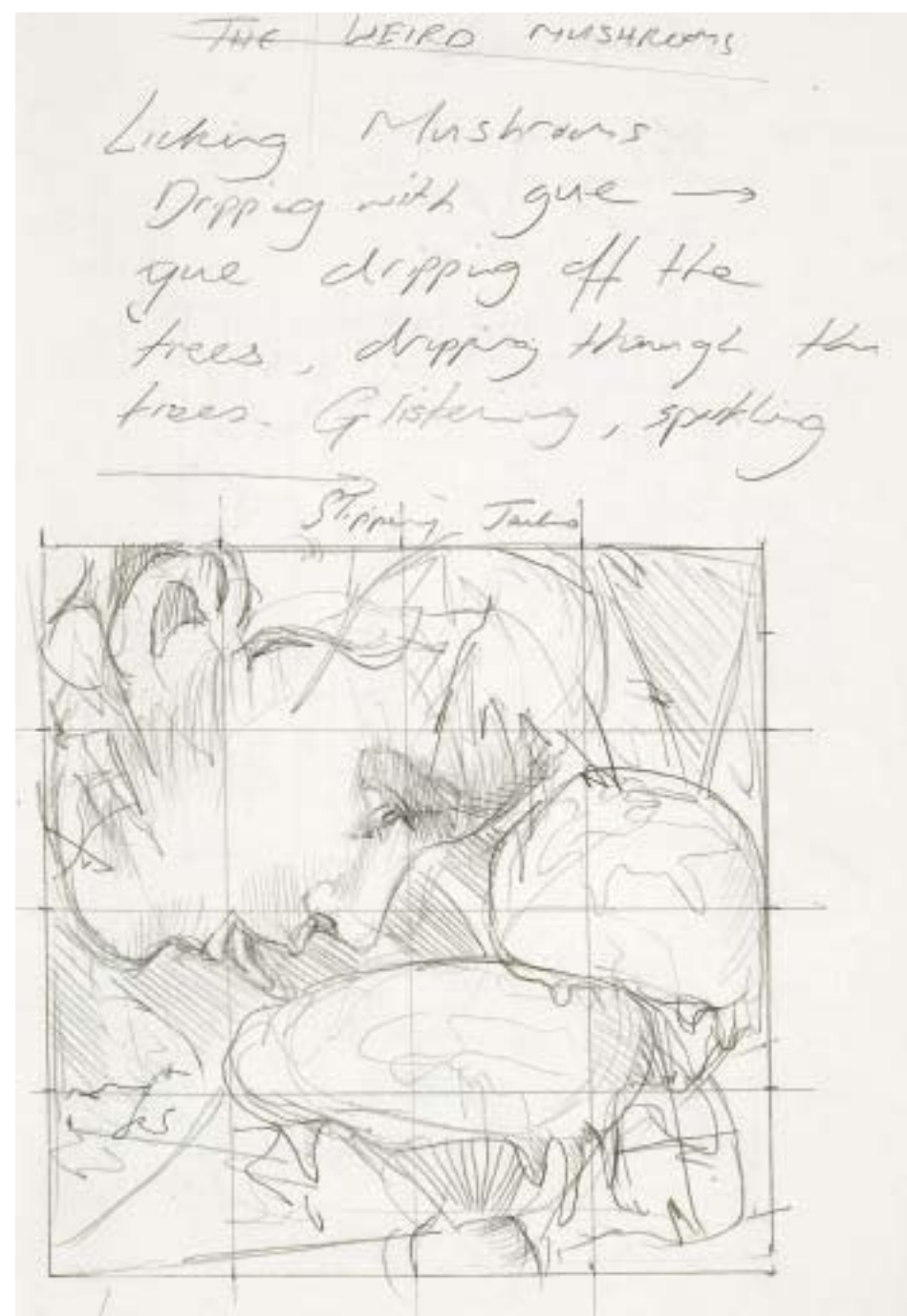


Shaggy Cap, 2008. Preparation study, pencil on paper, 14 x 9 3/4 inches.



Shaggy Cap, 2008. Acrylic on canvas, 35 1/2 x 23 1/2 inches.





Slippery Jack, 2008. Preparation study, pencil on paper, 11 1/2 x 8 1/4 inches.

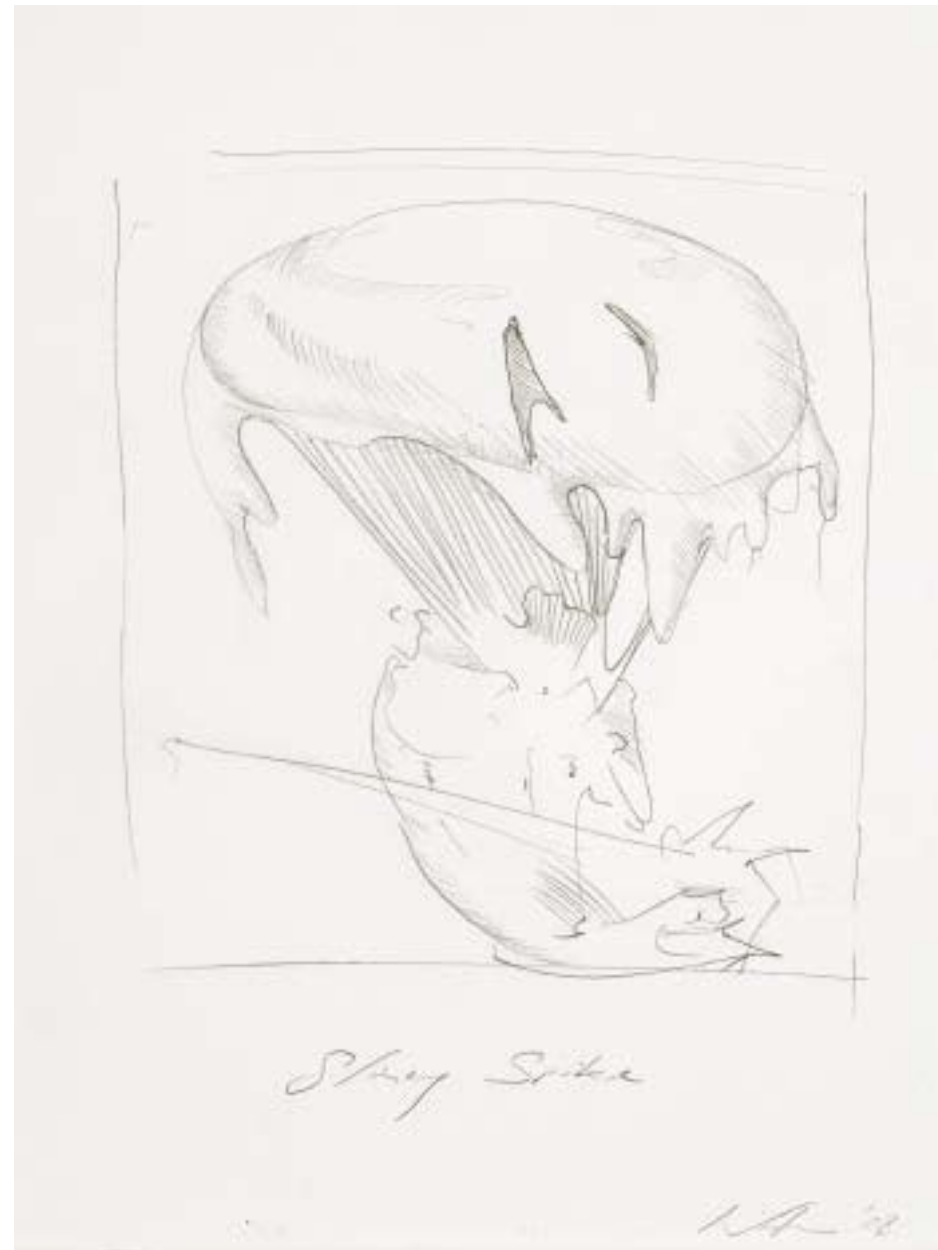


Slippery Jack, 2008. Acrylic on canvas, 55 x 55 inches.





Singing in the Dark, 2008.  
Acrylic on canvas 11 3/4 x 11 3/4 inches.



Slimey Spike, 2008.  
Preparation study, pencil on paper, 11 1/2 x 8 1/4 inches.



Slimey Spike, 2008.  
Acrylic on canvas 35 1/2 x 23 1/2 inches.





Scary Movie, 2008.  
Acrylic on canvas, 51 1/4 x 90 1/2 inches.





Gulp, 2007.  
Acrylic on canvas, 51 1/4 x 90 1/2 inches.





Watching You II, 2007.  
Acrylic on canvas, 11 3/4 x 11 3/4 inches.



Face Painting, 2008.  
Acrylic on canvas, 11 3/4 x 11 3/4 inches.





Little Vampire, 2008.  
Acrylic on canvas, 51 1/4 x 43 1/4 inches.



Transylvania, 2008.  
Preparation study, pencil on paper; 11 1/2 x 8 1/4 inches



Transylvania, 2008.  
Acrylic on canvas, 82 3/4 x 67 inches.





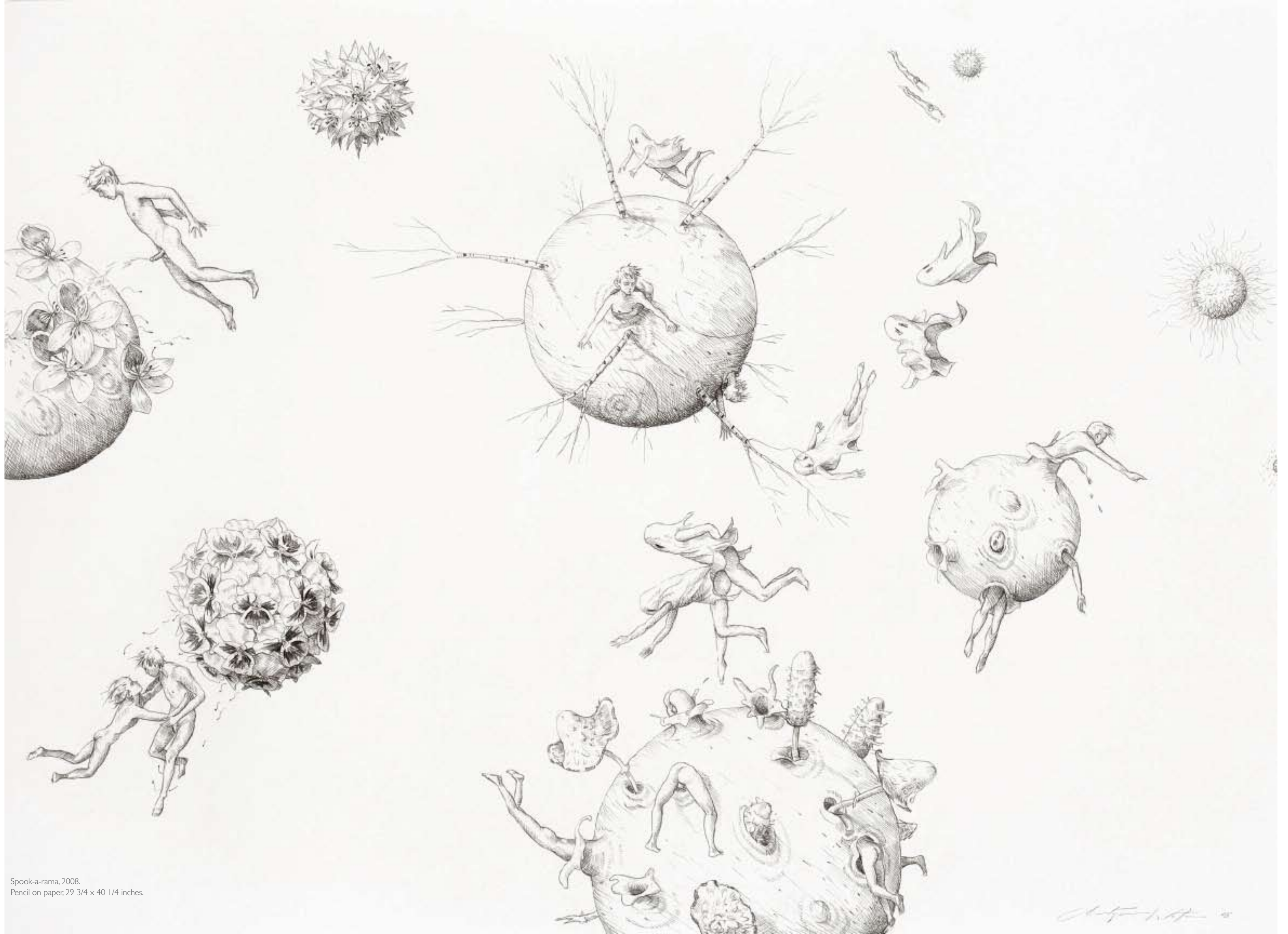
Us and Them, 2007.  
Acrylic on canvas, 67 x 196 3/4 inches.





The Trophy Tree, 2008.  
Acrylic on canvas, 82 3/4 x 59 inches.





Spook-a-rama, 2008.  
Pencil on paper, 29 3/4 x 40 1/4 inches.





The Perfume of Lilies across Space, 2008.  
Pencil on paper, 30 x 22 inches.



Last Love, 2008.  
Pencil on paper, 30 x 22 inches.





TOP: Left to Right:  
Two preparatory drawings for the Holbein Table, 2007

MAIN PHOTO  
Holbein Table, 2008.  
Marquetry and cherry wood, 102 1/3 x 51 1/4 x 28 3/4 inches

BOTTOM:  
Gothic Corner, 2005. Video stills, 9 minutes.



Christopher Winter

Born 1968, Kent, United Kingdom  
Lives and works in Berlin.

2005

Origins and Nations, Galerie Nord Kunstverein  
Tiergarten, Berlin

2003

Me, myself and I, Gutleut 15, Frankfurt

2002

Small Formats, Galerie Neue kunst, Mannheim

Der Berg, Heidelberg Kunstverein, Heidelberg

Saar Ferngas Förderpreis, Wilhelm-Hack Museum,  
Ludwigshafen

Christopher Winter is a member of the Artists Group **Special X**

**Education**

1996 - 1998

Kunstakademie Düsseldorf  
under Professor Fritz Schwegler

1987 - 1990

Camberwell School of Art, London  
BA (Hons) Fine Art (Painting)

1986 - 1987

Hastings College of Arts  
Hastings, UK  
Pre BA Foundation Course in Art and Design

2001

Event Horizon, Lothringer I 3, Munich

Filmbar, Video Programm, Museum Ludwig, Cologne

Sommerausstellung, Galerie Neue Kunst, Mannheim

Miscellaneous, Enders Projects, Frankfurt

Action Disco, Plus, Düsseldorf

Videoprogramm, Projektraum, Berlin

1999

Videoprogramm, Voges und Deisen, Frankfurt

une légende à suivre....., le Crédac, Centre d'art d'Ivry, Paris

Networking, P-House Gallery, Tokyo

Fliegen eröffnet, Städtische Galerie, Moers

**Scholarships**

October 1993 - June 1994

Stipendiat der Stadt Mannheim, Artist in  
Residence of the city of Mannheim, Germany

1998

Dessins, Galerie Almine Rech, Paris

Terminal, Musashino Art University, Tokyo

From Here, High Street Project, Christchurch, New Zealand

toi toi toi, Die Werkstatt, Düsseldorf

**Solo Exhibitions (Selection)**

2008-

Big Small Works, Edelman Arts, New York

2007

Hitzefrei, Drive Thru Gallery, Aschersleben Project,  
Aschersleben

Songs of Innocence, Neuhoff Edelman Gallery, New York

2006

Virgin Forest, Salander O'Reilly Gallery &  
Edelman Arts, New York

My Ambition to Get High....Videos,  
Kino International, Berlin

2005

If Things Get Real, Galerie Jaspers, Munich

2004

Passion, Kunst-Station Sankt Peter, Cologne

Things to Come, Basilika von St.Bonifaz, Munich

2003

Innocent Spaces, Artax, Düsseldorf

Heimat, Forum in Dominikanerkloster, Frankfurt

2002

Bavarian Heaven, Wilhelm-Hack Museum, Ludwigshafen

Winterwonderland, Oberwelt, Stuttgart

2001

Amazing Stories, Enders Projects, Frankfurt

2000

Holiday, Galerie Neue Kunst, Mannheim

1999

Kindergarten, Enders Projects, Frankfurt

Bavarian Bus Tour Massacre, Onomato  
Video Archive, Düsseldorf

Alien Sex Invaders, Raum X, Düsseldorf

1998

Buzz, Altes Tabakkontor, Mannheim

1995

Witness, Academia, Mannheim

1994

Ice Houses, Galerie Säule, Mannheim

1993

Illuminations, Städtisches Reiss-Museum, Mannheim

1992

Chlorine, Second show with Bank, Marshall Street Baths,  
Soho, London

1991

Bank Show, First show with Bank, The Bank,  
Lewisham Way, London

**Museum Collection**

2007

Vassar College, New York, The Frances Lehman Loeb Art  
Center, Threshold, 2005, Acrylic on Canvas

**Special X Ausstellungen / Speical X Exhibitions**

2005

The Manifesto Show, Special X, Fleisch, Berlin

The Gothic Corner, Special X, Glue, Berlin

2004

We Love Art, Special X, Kunstbüro, Düsseldorf

Notes:

<sup>1</sup> "Hansel and Grethel," Grimm's Fairy Tales, ed. Elizabeth Dalton  
(New York: Barnes & Noble, 2003), 62

<sup>2</sup> Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Faust, Part I (New York: New Directions, 1949), 158

<sup>3</sup> Erwin Panofsky, The Life and Art of Albrecht Dürer  
(Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1955)

**Group Exhibitions (Selection)**

2007

Summer, Neuhoff Edelman Gallery, New York

2006

Surrealism: Then & Now, Paul Kasmin Gallery & Edelman  
Arts, Inc., New York

Winter Show, Galerie Gmurzynska, St. Moritz

Trees, Salander O'Reilly, New York





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