

Publication: Artforum International, October 2012

Author: Jurriaan Benschop

## BERLIN

## Tomasz Kowalski

CARLIER | GEBAUER

The first impression is always one of freedom: Tomasz Kowalski flits—almost carelessly, you might say—between his personal imagination and echoes of familiar modernist styles. In the crowded landscape of contemporary painting, it is remarkable enough that an artist not yet thirty even has a “personal” imagination. In Kowalski’s visual world, fresh invention enters into dialogue with art history. In his recent exhibition “The Truant,” the Polish artist exhibited fourteen oil paintings and thirty-three drawings and collages, all dated 2012. His scenes tell tragicomic stories, presenting life as a dynamic and colorful theater of incongruities. Faces, or parts of faces, appear frequently—for example, *Untitled* gives us a close-up of someone sticking out his tongue. Zoom in and you can spot yet another figure in the open mouth. And as you go on looking, more and more figures emerge, seemingly out of nowhere, as in a dream or hallucination. In *Spy vs Spy*, it is time in the form of clocks and watches that multiplies, bringing beads of sweat to the brow of the work’s central figure.

When figurative elements perform an abstract function, Kowalski’s work reveals new levels of meaning. *Szafa* (Wardrobe), one of my favorites, shows an open wardrobe with dresses, neckties, and other pieces of clothing hung side by side and several pairs of shoes at the bottom. Is someone standing there among the dresses and neckties? This suspicion breathes life into the painting. *Paravent* (Screen), hanging next to



Tomasz Kowalski,  
*Untitled (Cat)*, 2012,  
oil on canvas,  
67 x 59".

enrich the context for his paintings. This time, he let painting and drawing speak for themselves; rather than inhibiting him, this constraint has encouraged his imagination to run free. It will be interesting to see if Kowalski is equally capable of breaking loose of his artistic models, despite his seeming so at home in the atmosphere of the early twentieth century, when Dadaism, Surrealism, and *Neue Sachlichkeit* were at their height. *Untitled (Smoke)*, for instance, channels Otto Dix and George Grosz, its smoke-filled festivities pervaded by a sense of impending doom, and evokes collage through the use of paint alone. But a piece like *Untitled (Cat)* feels more contemporary, despite its echoes of Surrealism. The piano keys across which a black feline trips become a road extending through a landscape into the distance and drawing the eye out toward the horizon. For all the painting’s kitschy humor, it is artistically engaging for its treatment of color and details, such as the subtle shadow of the cat. It is the synergy between Kowalski’s imagination, his figurative play on abstraction, and his confident handling of paint—rather than his adept citations—that give his work its vitality.

it, shows a folding screen behind which someone is presumably changing. Again, what remains unseen becomes significant. The zigzagging screen obstructs one’s view but also stands alone as an abstract field. *Nysa*, too, is dominated by a horizontal color field, in this case the doors of a blue police van. At other times, figures on a blank field remain simply illustration, as in *Postcard*, a grimly amusing scene painted as if on its namesake, with the horizontal lines for the address turned into bunks on which three men sleep. From the adjacent message area, two men in uniform lock the sleepers in, using the vertical line separating the two halves of the card as a jailhouse door.

In earlier exhibitions, Kowalski used installations and sculpture to

—Jurriaan Benschop

Translated from Dutch by David McKay.