



Anton Henning, *Oasis*, 2006, mixed media. Installation view, SMAK, Ghent, Belgium, 2007.

ALTHOUGH HE IS LITTLE KNOWN in America, Anton Henning has become one of Germany's most compelling artists. Born in Berlin in 1964, he found art school so boring that he dropped out, opting instead to train himself. A libertine at heart, Henning not only learned to paint but before long began to sculpt, record videos, design environments, and make music. In the late 1990s, he even established a fictive band, the Manker Melody Makers, as an alter ego, assuming the roles of all its members and documenting the band's faux performances as though they were real events. The idea of a complete and closed system at the core of this project is intrinsic to his practice in general, which frequently trades in the idiom of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*. His museum installations leave nothing to chance—he not only maps out the placement of his works, frames them, lights them, and chooses the surrounding wall colors but also frequently equips the galleries with custom carpeting and furniture. Oases of a kind, these rooms parody the highbrow seriousness of more traditional picture galleries, as well as calling into question the value systems that make them possible.

The artist's stunning survey at SMAK in Ghent, Belgium, this past spring revealed just how adept he has become at accomplishing this. The first space resembled a private cabinet of masterpieces such as might be found in a wealthy nineteenth-century residence. Paintings by Henning in the styles of artists such as Cézanne, Miró, and Picasso were enshrined in carefully constructed lacquered wooden frames with built-in diffuse lighting. Inventions of his own were interspersed in this parade of impersonated works—a large interior scene splashed with pastel colors; a completely abstract painting filled with unsophisticated rolling loops of color; and several pieces featuring a strange, surrealistic shape, the artist's so-called Henning. This arabesque-like form is the artist's personal logo: It is a nonentity that revels in being nothing more nor less than a decorative curlicue. Henning's own idiosyncratic works fit

seamlessly into the classical arrangement of traditional still lifes, portraits, and landscapes. The meticulous hanging was revealed to be a sham, however, by a preposterous modernistic cube of paintings Henning placed directly in the center of this room. While the installation was an homage to artists Henning respects, it was also a send-up of our tendency to judge artworks according to established canons of taste. A less proficient artist wouldn't dare venture into this no-man's-land of aesthetic clichés. Henning earnestly proffered works made to satisfy a hunger for the beautiful, in full awareness that this very desire ironically contributes to their trivialization.



Anton Henning, *Oasis*, 2006, mixed media. Installation view, SMAK, Ghent, Belgium, 2007. All works by Anton Henning © 2007 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York, NY/VG Bild-Kunst.

Filling almost the entirety of another gallery at SMAK was *Oasis*, 2006—a large group of sculptures carefully organized on a carpet replicating the design of *Interieur No. 342*, 2006, one of the Mondrianesque paintings in the previous gallery. The sculptures in *Oasis* reference a panoply of Dadaists and their followers—constructing a free-for-all environment that supersedes even their most radical deconstructive attempts. Henning's tactics both here and elsewhere are close to those of Francis Picabia and Sigmar Polke, minus their scathing, humorous irony. Henning is more interested in how far he can push various aesthetic categories—to the extent of almost but not quite going over the top. No matter how much Polke and Picabia experiment with kitsch, their work maintains a certain mysterious sophistication. Not so with Henning, who instead champions gawky inelegance—manifesting a form of utopianism particular to his generation of German artists. Guilt and suffering are not his thing. Rather, it seems that Henning's attitude to

“mastering the past” is that it would be better to just *be*, with all one’s shortcomings and strengths—an attitude evinced in his deliberately maladroit handling. To be sure, Henning is not always successful with this strategy: *The Arrival of Christ in Ghent*, 2007, a psychedelically looping ceiling painting on view at SMAK, fell flat, either because the idea was simply too corny or the PVC base on which the piece was painted made it look too cheap.

The apogee of the exhibition was the room-size installation *Oktagon* (Octagon), 2006, which was originally constructed for the Frank Gehry–designed museum MARTa, in Herford, Germany. In this work, Henning really pulls out all the stops. From a distance, the landscape-format opening in the front of the octagonal environment suggested that the work was merely a three-dimensional painting. Inside, after being made to remove one’s shoes at the entrance, one readily settled into the comfortable ’60s-style furniture strewn around, and one enjoyed the space. The tabletops looked like versions of Damien Hirst spin paintings; the warm yellow squishy plastic of some light-box chairs reminded one uncomfortably of urine; the wild array of paintings on the walls seemed to flaunt Henning’s appreciation of all that is sensuous. In this candy box of aesthetic pleasures, various treats were on offer, chief among them pictures of pliant female nudes in the styles of nineteenth-century salon paintings and of more recent soft-core pinups. Actual strippers and some raunchy music were all that was missing.

Throughout his work, Henning deploys a similar methodology, jauntily exposing the empty promises of a variety of cultural clichés. One of his installations, titled *The Answer (My Friend)*, 2006, features a small, double-sided picture, with an image of a skull on one side and a clownlike figure on the other. Blown about on its central axis by a nearby fan, the image revolves in an unending circle. Cheesy to the point of outlandishness, this version of a *vanitas* painting is a world away from the hopeful lilt of Bob Dylan’s well-known song. Instead it suggests the way the wind of today’s art world is blowing: toward a dead end. This is the genius of Henning’s work—by painting known motifs, citing styles, and mimicking installation techniques, he makes known the frightening lack of critical perspective with which art today is too often hedonistically consumed.

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