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Felix Gephart


Rory MacLean meets Felix Gephart

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Success in the art world can mean turning oneself into a brand. When an artist's work attracts notice, it's hard to move away from a successful formula, especially if sales are good. With bills to pay and a market to please, an artist may resist their creative impulse, so as not to undermine their marketable brand. He or she won't explore new ideas. They'll paint themselves into a corner. Their work may become repetitive and predictable.

'I believe we should value change in both the artist and the viewer,' Felix Gephart told me when we met in his lofty Berlin apartment. 'As long as the artist keeps trying something new, I believe he is on a good path.'

Gephart is in no danger of painting himself into a corner. The 35-year-old, Berlin-based artist is reluctant even to label himself. Figurative artist? Gifted draftsman? Satirical illustrator? Passionate painter? Graffiti writer?

'It did all begin with writing,' he said with a laugh. 'In Bochum where I grew up my older brother used to go out and do graffiti. At the age of twelve I said to him, "Mum won't like that. I'm going to tell her." So to shut me up he took me along with him, and it was such a thrill. A month later I visited a friend in Berlin, and painted on the Wall. In 1989 when it came down people started selling fragments of it, with my painting on some of the pieces.'



'I was never a graffiti bomber. I was more of a Hall of Fame writer, learning tricks from older artists, putting my images on walls and buildings. The sheer scale of the work affected me, making a place my own, driving me to want to create more, to do better.' Gephart, who has blue eyes, short blond hair and a solid, muscular frame, laughed again and added, 'But I should stop talking. If I was any good with words I'd have become an author. Let me just show you my pictures.'

After a spell toying with sociology, Gephart studied graphic design at Dortmund's School of Applied Sciences. His graduation piece – 18 large drawings illustrating Bret Easton Ellis' psychological thriller *American Psycho* – was powerful enough to win him a Fulbright Scholarship and place at the School of Visual Arts in New York.



'When I read a text that inspires me, it takes me right into a picture,' he explained as we leafed through his startling Old Master-like *American Psycho* images: a young woman as a giant ant at the dinner table, a mutilated dog with sexy blonde hair, rivals discussing consumerism and branding – their bodies made up of the words Aiva and Sansui. 'I don't want to replicate a story. That would be too tedious. Instead I try to reinvent it.'

Gephart had been drawn to the States by the quality of American illustrators. 'I thought there must be a source, an education behind this amazing work.' Once in New York he turned away from his familiar Rapidograph technical pen, as he had moved on from graffiti lettering in Germany. At the School of Visual Arts he produced *Room 101*, six haunting images of surveillance cameras, institutional cruelty and Doublespeak drawn from Orwell's *1984*. Created with fine Chinese and Japanese brushes, his paintings were bound into a book, along with Orwell's text and a single, shocking photograph of an abused detainee at Abu Ghraib prison. This exceptional book – of which there is only a single copy – suggests parallels between Orwell's Oceania and fearful, post 9/11 America.

'I don't think one should be proud of a country. I'm uneasy with that,' he said, shaking his head. 'Pride in your work, pride in friends; that I can understand. But pride in a nation, in nationalism? No.'

In New York Gephart reinvented himself yet again by producing three big colour gouaches based on Luc Sante's *Low Life*. His copy of the book, a vivid account of the city in the 1890s, was covered with

Rory MacLean
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