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Your first encounter with Melike Kara's paintings may depend on your general comfort-level in social situations, on how easy you find it to show up at a party filled with strangers, or on how well your anti-anxiety medication is working that day. Often slightly more than life-sized, Kara's canvasses are populated with small casts of characters. They are groups numbering between three and eight, often piled atop each other, with limbs intertwined like corals ready to petrify into a reef. Engaged in situations that look in turn like subdued cocktail parties or ecstatic bacchanals, these characters relax, converse and fuck, all while either staring blankly off to the side or straight out into the empty space in front of the painting.

Some of modern art history's most iconic works—Manet's bar at the *Folies-Bergère* as much as Picasso's *Demoiselles*—have drawn their power from the quizzical expressions on the faces of their protagonists, inspiring scores of critics to wax about the coldly seductive gazes sent out by these *demi monde* denizens. In front of Kara's works, such fantasies are harder to sustain. It is undeniable that there is something sexual about these paintings, filled as they are with gyrating torsos and embracing limbs. But where her modernist precursors pandered clearly to the fantasies of their (overwhelmingly male) audiences, Kara leaves it to us to figure out the basic rules of engagement with the inhabitants of her paintings. Are we welcome here? Are we even allowed to watch? Are these characters posing for us or for each other? Do they know we're there, and if they do, do they care? Like the artist, who is hesitant to explicate her work in detail, her creatures do not appear particularly interested in speaking to us. Instead, they seem to be waiting out

an awkward silence, like the crowd at a party when a new guest walks in unannounced.

Given her work's maturity of style, it can be surprising to learn that Kara's public career is only a few years old. Born in Germany to a Turkish Alevi family, Kara attended Düsseldorf's famous art academy until 2014, when she graduated as a *Meisterschüler* to Rosemarie Trockel. Although Kara's style of painting shows little visual resemblance to her teacher's practice, it was there that she learned to create arrangements that manage to appear suffused with sexual energy to one viewer, but unapproachably distant to another. It may not be wrong to think of the recent excitement around Kara's work as another testament to the strength of the Rhineland's resurgence as an art center or the undiminished strength of that region's painterly tradition. However, what sets Kara into a class of her own is her unique skill to powerfully re-infuse the restrained formal sensibilities of her peers with the political and sexual energy often associated with previous generations of feminist artists.

It is this balancing act between form and not-quite-narrative elements that lets us chart a path through Kara's shifting and evolving oeuvre. The oldest painting displayed on the artist's personal website is just two years old. More oil drawing than painting, the stark white background of *on the other doorbell* (2015) is divided up by a network of nervous blue lines that coalesce into a group of five figures as if by accident. There is no doubt that this work was painted quickly, in a bout of inspiration, and the figures seem to reflect this. They are all action, no interiority. Even though we witness them hugging and acrobatically climbing each other, there is no clear indica-





tion what relationship these individual figures might have to one another. In the poem the artist wrote to accompany the work—in fact, every painting has a poem to go along with it—Kara herself seems to confirm this connection between the furtive execution and the work's inhabitants. It hints that a love story may have provided the inspiration for the work, though one in which both sides are prone to act without fully understanding the situation. Roughly translated, it reads: [...] the outline is black you say / for me it's a rose color / what are colors after all / they tell me one step after another / that heals everything I suppose. [...]

For Kara, the two years since the completion of this painting have been filled with small formal innovations, none monumental in and of itself, but each with a subtle effect on the mood and power of the work. Soon after *on the other doorbell*, many paintings started to include more than one color, the background being filled in more and more with fields of soft rose, violet or earth tones. The process slowed down, lines got smoother and characters more precisely rendered. In a recent painting, a gaggle of gimp-masked figures lounges about in front of a soft pink background. Still ultimately inscrutable in their intentions, these characters have become slightly more legible and available as a site for our projections. The bearded man (Kara herself denies that any of her figures has a fixed gender at all) at the center seems in charge of the situation, his contorted companions by contrast project a feeling of confusion. Ultimately, whether we see this space as a beach scene or the inside of a sex club caught mid-orgy, it tells us more about ourselves than about the intentions that lead Kara to create the piece.

The most recent formal step may be the most daring one yet. For a solo booth at Independent Brussels in Spring 2016, Kara created, among other works, two floor-to-ceiling glass divider walls, each painted on

both sides. A look at just one of them, *die Geister die ich rief* (2016), reveals the depth this expansion into three dimensions adds to figures that otherwise resemble those appearing in previous works. By blacking out most of the glass with scrupulously applied oil stick, Kara both obscures and draws attention to her transparent painting surface. Focusing on one area of the image, the figures seem suspended in outer space or trapped in a deep hole. Focusing on another, one becomes acutely aware of the work's bi-directionality. Are the figures on opposites of the glass in conversation with one another? Are they part of the same space or do they show the same cast of characters caught in two different situations?

The next step will be to take this exploration of sculptural space one step further. A recent showing at Independent New York in 2017 served as the first showing of a number of wood sculptures painted a ghostly lime white. It will be exciting to see where the possibilities of the new medium will lead. Standing in the gallery space in New York, Kara's creation for the first time leaves the safe confines of the bidimensional picture plane. If her painterly experiments have turned amorphous groups of characters into ever more distinguishable individuals, perhaps this will be the time that these characters step out of the safe comfort of their natural habitat. As Kara's poems and personal conversations have long hinted at, many of her paintings have their roots in the real world, in concrete personal and political experiences. Maybe the next step will be to address those experiences directly, for Kara's characters to step out of their cliques, so to speak, and walk towards us, their audience.



