

## Rosa Loy's Paintings Are Poetry Without Parable

The women in Rosa Loy's dreamlike figurative paintings have always been engaged in something significant: just don't ask the artist what it all means. In a new show at Kohn Gallery in Los Angeles, the member of the so-called New Leipzig School is happy for her paintings to lead to a little confusion. Words by [Katya Tylevich](#)



Lichtspiegel, 2018. Courtesy of Kohn Gallery

Rosa Loy opens her exhibition *So Near and Yet So Far* at Kohn Gallery in Los Angeles on a night when the evening falls ahead of schedule. The deadly November wildfires are just beginning to erupt some forty kilometres away.

We are being followed by a German film crew. Rosa and her husband, artist Neo Rauch, are subjects of a new documentary about the so-called New Leipzig School, a contentious term for the generation of painters educated at the Academy of Visual Arts in Leipzig in newly reunified 1990s Germany. This group of artists may share a proximity to GDR-era socialist realism and practise figurative painting, but they have diverse aesthetics and worldviews. Some critics reject the term for its lack of precision. Rosa has made her peace with it.

New Leipzig indicates little more than a shared location, she says, but location is important to her paintings. Place colonizes memory. Her works draw from it. I personally think the term signifies art that developed its character during a period of expected change—looking out at upheaval, awaiting internal conversion. Loy's exhibition suggests a similar quality.

The night before at The Broad museum, Loy sat on a panel alongside Rauch and opera director Yuval Sharon discussing the married pair's costumes and set design for *Lohengrin*, Richard Wagner's opera staged at the 2018 Bayreuth Festival. The crux of the conversation was—here we go—change. *Lohengrin*'s story revolves around a female protagonist choosing between security and knowledge. The takeaway (choose security) is no longer palatable, so should we change the script? A different script doesn't change the fact that Wagner was a committed anti-Semite and hero to Hitler, but how we handle that information is subject to change, as well. That, too, was part of the conversation.



Left: Tulpenzwiebeln, 2018; Anlage, 2017

The Lohengrin project took six years to realize, but only five minutes to grasp, says Loy. Her paintings are accustomed to interrogation and instability. Some of her paintings purposefully lack a focal point, leaving the eye no obvious place to rest. “I want to make it a little bit confused,” she says.



Lolly, 2018



Wippe, 2018

Before the first guests arrive, she walks me through the gallery and stops in front of a canvas titled Lolly, a dark maroon composition depicting a woman feeding a birdlike creature with a human head. “I think she’s feeding the creature the wrong food,” Loy says, as if considering the work of a stranger. “She’s trying to help but does it the wrong way. That’s the problem.” Look for it, and every painting in the room reveals one: a problem; a condition. Loy’s works are poetry without parable. They convey a sense of trouble but no resolution.

### **Did you always want to be an artist?**

No. Art is a hard world. I always painted, but I didn’t even know if what I made was art. I grew up in a hardworking family of horticulturists, which was also my first area of study and my first profession. I worked a lot and very effectively. After five years of horticulture, I found a government desk job. That was horrible. I decided, no, it’s not my dream to spend my life in an office like this. At age twenty-seven, I started my studies over again, this time as a painter.

“Painting is my way to elongate time. If I think to the past or dream of the future, I lose the moment, and I lose time”

### **Do your horticulture days connect to your art?**

Both have to do with growth. You have to make the best conditions for your little piece to grow. You have to be in a good mood, you can't drink alcohol during the week, can't eat too late, can't sleep too late. You have to bring your own body into the right circumstances to make the right work in your studio.

### **Many artists would disagree about needing a good mood and sobriety to make good art...**

But I'm the colour, I'm the pencil, I'm the tool for the painting. The inspiration for it goes through me. I'm the one who makes the work. I have to take care of my hardware. In the painting *Mässigung*, which means moderation, there is a note to myself. Keys of a typewriter spell the word. Don't eat too much. There is always a note. Don't work too much. Don't sleep too much....

### **So many rules!**

Well, look at it another way. This painting also says, “Eat more!” No, my only rule is that I don't use too many colours in one painting. If you look at paintings of the Old Masters, they don't use much colour. They mostly use one. If you see all of my paintings together, they may look very colourful, but one by one, each is a completely different colour composition. One picture is all red, another all blue.



Left: Beeren auf dem Kopf, 2018; Right: Tulpenzwiebeln, 2018

“I was born in Zwickau and grew up in Leipzig, the middle of Germany in Saxony, which has a long tradition of painting, including the Romantics. You can feel it”

The seasons are important to me for this reason. For example, in late winter and spring I see a lot of white, yellow and some pink and violet. These are the colours typical of spring flowers. And in the fall, the dark brown, green and oranges have an effect on the way I see.

**Sounds like the horticulturist in you.**

Yes, sure. I am also interested in seasons because, through my work, I try to stay in whatever moment it is. Painting is my way to elongate time. If I think to the past or dream of the future, I lose the moment, and I lose time.

**If each painting is a connection to the moment and its specific characteristics, then is it also a connection to place?**

Sure, to my hometown. I was born in Zwickau and grew up in Leipzig, the middle of Germany in Saxony, which has a long tradition of painting, including the Romantics. You can feel it. When you live in a city that is 1000 years old, with a long tradition of music, painting and printing, it's in the air.

**Then what are your thoughts about the term New Leipzig School? Does it mean anything to you?**

It means we are all painters from the same city, with a good academic art education. Beyond that, we are very different. The term says less about painting than about locality. And I'm fine with it.



Bienenweide, 2015



Mässigung, 2018

**Doesn't locality suggest a shared social or historical experience?**

Look, I don't live in a complete vacuum. I am part of society, part of a time. I am not insulated and, for that reason, neither is the work. What's interesting, though, is that the more subjective my paintings, the more people they seem to reach. I never paint what "everybody" is thinking at a particular moment. That isn't interesting to me at all. It's senseless. My paintings are my interior world. They are very private. Yet, they remind people of themselves.

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**Do you ever research a specific subject or go out looking for inspiration?**

No. Rather than go out looking for an idea, it's more important that I catch an idea when I have one—make a small drawing before it disappears. I don't take photographs. I make hand-

drawings so that my body remembers whatever it is that catches my attention. The most I can do is try to empty my mind and see what comes in.

### **How do you empty your mind?**

Ritual. Like I said, I go to my studio, throw my phone out the window and look for quiet. Maybe I will have an idea, maybe nothing will happen. But it's important you try to trust yourself. Fear is poison.

### **You don't consider fear part of the artistic process?**

It is. But if you don't also trust yourself, there is no process.

### **I guess what we're getting at is intuition.**

Well, Neo and I worked on this Lohengrin opera for six years, for example, with the music playing in our studio the entire time. The opera is supposed to tell you a specific story, which in itself is very boring—fall in love, die. But listen to the music itself and it tells you much more. I like to go to concerts for the pictures, landscapes and stories that I begin to develop.

### **So, you are moved by something transcendent rather than narrative?**

Yes, I think music is a gift, not a fight. In the last ten or twenty years a lot of operas have become political platforms, as if that's an alternative to beauty. But beauty can also contain breaks with the status quo. We don't have to see the opera the way Wagner saw it. During a time when the role of women is changing in society, we can see that kind of change in the opera, as well. We can choose to see the protagonist Elsa as growing and educating herself. She becomes stronger through her knowledge. This is something I'm also interested in in my paintings, this kind of growth. But even in this reading, the opera remains a celebration, something romantic. You can make a beautiful opera while also breaking it apart. The same way in a painting you can consider dark elements through a kind of beauty.

### **What do you mean that your work deals with "growth"?**

My paintings often show two women and the connection between them. This is not an idea that comes to me directly or intellectually. The pictures are the result of my subconscious. I go to my studio in the morning and try to interpret the influences of my own work and where they come from. I have been painting like this for years, always trying to think of the reason why.



Left: Karre, 2017; Right: Nonnenstübchen, 2014

### **What are some of your interpretations?**

After some time, I remembered a moment from my early childhood, when my family moved from a very beautiful village to the city of Leipzig and I lost all of my girlfriends. For the first time in my life, I created an imaginary friend. And I think it's this memory that ultimately led to some of these paintings. That's not to say the painting is a resolution of a problem, it just shows me what the problem is.

### **Since they are all products of your subconscious, do you see every new painting as connected to a previous one?**

My studio at home is crowded. The works hang all on one wall and talk to each other. Here, they hang in different spaces and long for each other, look at each other from around corners. But they know each other. Very often I am happy during the installation of new projects because the people I work with put the paintings together in a way I would never think of. Whenever I see new works next to older ones, I'm surprised by the new story they tell and the tension they create. I like it. Each painting can live a separate life, even if together they are a family.



Klippe, 2018

### **A family with unresolved problems...**

I've found that the canvas is a good place to find clarity and to have a dialogue in the third person about a problem. When a picture creates a dialogue, that's when it has power.

### **I've read several written reviews that describe your paintings as a system of symbols.**

I don't know why people say this. It doesn't matter whether or not something is a symbol for me, because something else may be a symbol for you. I think it's very important that people trust what they actually see, not what they think they have to see. If it looks like something is under the sofa in a painting, maybe it's there, maybe it's not. But don't ask me.