

Philipp Fürhofer at Galerie Judin

The title of Philipp Fürhofer's recent exhibition, *Walpurgisnacht*, was borrowed from a scene in Goethe's *Faust*, so we can assume that the show's recurrent concern with light was to be understood not only literally, but also in a symbolic way. The thirteen pieces on view could be called assemblages, light boxes, or paintings; in most cases, they were all three at once. Many of the works harked back to the tradition of Romantic landscape painting.

Using a transparent acrylic glass box as a base for most of the works, Fürhofer brought in incandescent lightbulbs and LED tubes, usually lots of them, to illuminate the scenes or to make them part of the figuration. In *Tequila Sunrise* (all works 2017), painted bubbles appear on top of a nearly ten-inch-deep acrylic box, which contains a pile of dead lightbulbs. Higher up, a single electric light source switches on and off at regular intervals; it conjures a rising orange sun, shining over a mountainous landscape with water. The result is a Romantic view, made of contemporary detritus—but it does not feel like a pastiche; it actually convinces as a mysterious and ambiguous landscape.

In *Walpurgisnacht 1*, a view into the infinity of a forest is created through two layers of lightbulbs and a two-way mirror. Fürhofer's boxes are triumphs of illusionism, of ingenuous visual staging. His assemblages allow him to combine various textures and to relate these spatially—in this he has surely been informed by his work as a set designer for the opera. The works may be shiny and slick, but they also contain darker undertones. The alternation of light and darkness, regulated by power switches, enables the transformation of motifs. Suddenly two faces appear, nearing each other. A body becomes a forest, a torso a landscape. Nature and human physicality merge.

Amid so many recent efforts to create forms of contemporary painting that go beyond the canvas, Fürhofer's work stands out for the way it accomplishes this without too much straining too much for effect. Instead, in a surprising way and with contemporary materials and technique, Fürhofer has renewed the tradition of Romantic landscape painting to reflect on human beings' relation to nature in the present.

Just two of the works in the show—*Nimmermehr* (Nevermore) and *Schlafwandler* (Sleepwalker)—functioned without electric light, but they were equally convincing in terms of textural expression, the latter, for instance, through the way its tense, curving acrylic-glass surface accentuates the atmospheric paint application. *Green Falls* employed a smooth fading-on and off of the light, making for a pleasing contrast with the abrupt and frequent changes of light in some of the other pieces. Fürhofer displays freedom in the materials and techniques he has chosen. There is no gap between the work's formal and material appearance and the physical and mental landscapes it presents to us.

Jurriaan Benschop