

Friedrich
Kunath
THIS IS
WHERE
THE WEST
ENDS

Wie hab ich dieses Jahr verbracht, 2011,
oil on carbon paper, laminated on fabric, 125 x 101 x 4 cm

Text by Katya Tylevich
Photography by Alexei Tylevich



His career took him all the way from East Berlin to California where, away from the conventions of the contemporary art world, the artist finds freedom to explore his favourite themes in the shadow (and the sun) of Hollywood. Like Proust in Santa Monica, the artist talks to Katya Tylevich about the relationship between perfumes and memory and how in his mind Germany smells of honey, floor polish, old smoke and spilled beer.

I leave Friedrich Kunath's studio smelling like milk and poop. To cut a long story short, a perfume bottle labelled 'Angel Hair' sounds better than it smells. I would have fared better spritzing my inner wrists with one of countless other scents the artist has displayed throughout his studio — vintage bottles, kitsch bottles, expensive bottles of gardenia or lavender, of leather, smoke, whiskey, honey, or even floor polish.

There are two parts to Kunath's workspace: the industrial and more or less uniform studio up front, and, in back, a dark, colourful intimate room that looks like a place where rainbows go for adult entertainment. This is where Kunath keeps some of the works that have already been in shows — ghost paintings, he says. They share the walls and floors with Kunath's other rare, vintage and weird stuff, furniture, instruments, artworks and toys. Kunath tells me he likes to have two worlds he can retreat to: the clinical, organized one up front, and this back room, which he calls, 'fuck, I don't know what time it is.' The artist tells me he can't function in a space too clean. You're one of those people who need clutter? I ask. No, what he needs are 'layers'. A word all too appropriate for his varied works, of course. His photographs, sculptures, paintings, drawings, art notebooks and

videos: like Napoleon cakes in which humour coats melancholy, colour spreads over texture, historical and pop references meet, and the absurd tops the familiar. Born in 1974 in Chemnitz, Germany, Kunath grew up in East Berlin and was most recently living and working in Bonn before he moved to Los Angeles in 2008. Now, in his East L.A. studio, Kunath speculates as to why the word 'nostalgia' is often used in reference to his works, since he doesn't feel nostalgic. Which isn't to say he doesn't take the occasional look, or sniff, back into the past.

— *Hearing you describe it, it sounds like art just happened upon you by accident.*

I really never planned on becoming an artist. I was noodling around at age 18, with thoughts of becoming a rock star or maybe a bus driver. If not that, then a Formula One driver or a professional tennis player. It was my mother who took my paintings to an art school. When she said they'd accepted me, I thought it was all a big joke. 'Those idiots accepted me into art school?' I had absolutely no idea what I was doing. And there was no internet in 1991, so I couldn't even learn enough to pretend I knew what I was doing. I went about art school by skateboarding and playing ten-



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nis, but slowly, over time, I came to realize that, well, maybe this isn't such a joke, after all. Art came to me. It was never forced on me. And I feel lucky for that, when I look at the students I teach at Art Center in Pasadena, now. They're under such pressure to produce and to make — and to make sense. I'm not even so sure art can be taught. Being an artist really requires more of a de-education. I had a tremendous amount of time to experiment, which was extremely important to me. Now, time like that is treated like pure luxury.

— *Has that mentality changed the idea of what an artist does?*
The idea of an artist has become de-romanticized; it's stripped down to its bare bones of business and rules. I remember when I first went to art school, everybody was listening to Tom Waits and opera, going to theatre and drinking red wine. Personally, I was listening to hip hop and wanted nothing to do with that shit, but I definitely had the sense that things were changing as the years went on and the art students started wearing suits. Now, I see my students under pressure to show their parents an artefact in exchange for the money they've spent on their art educations. It's a monetary exchange, in a way, and it feels grotesque to me. Maybe it's an American problem: that we've come to confuse artists with professional curators.

— *What about you? Have you seen yourself change as an artist? Do you allow yourself the luxury of time without production?*

Look at my studio: It looks like an opium den. I certainly don't run a factory. I allow myself a lot of time to think, and I don't consider that work. I just allow whatever comes to go through me, like an amplifier. I also never plan a work in advance. I just start.

— *Has your approach to work changed as a result of moving to L.A.?*

There are certain aesthetic generousities I allow myself more in L.A. Maybe it's the sun, maybe it's the vast open stretches or the isolation, but I feel like I'm able to explore places I couldn't before. I don't think about what can and can't be done, which tends to happen when you hang around with other artists and go to a lot of shows. In Los Angeles, it's not all about art: it's about film. I suppose both artists and filmmakers work on narratives, but at the end of the day, who's aware of an artist when this place is full of movie stars? And that gives me all the freedom in the world. That feeling is the most important thing I want, as an artist. Maybe it's that I'm from communist East Berlin, that I always have the drive to go as far west of that as I can. California? This is where the 'West' ends. Go to Santa Monica, and that's it. Go any further and you find yourself East again.

Untitled (Self-portrait), 2011, fibre print, 66.2 x 55.9 cm



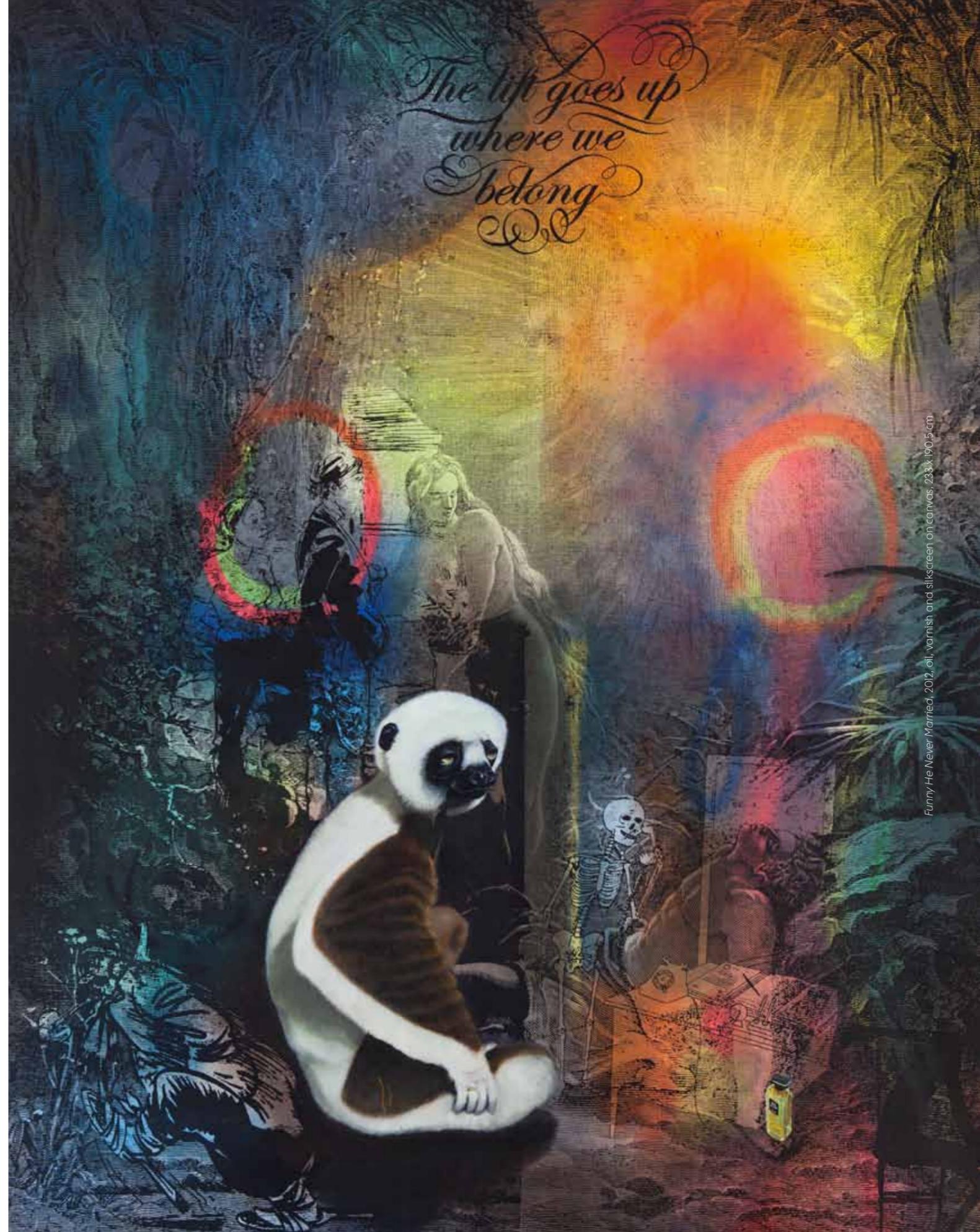
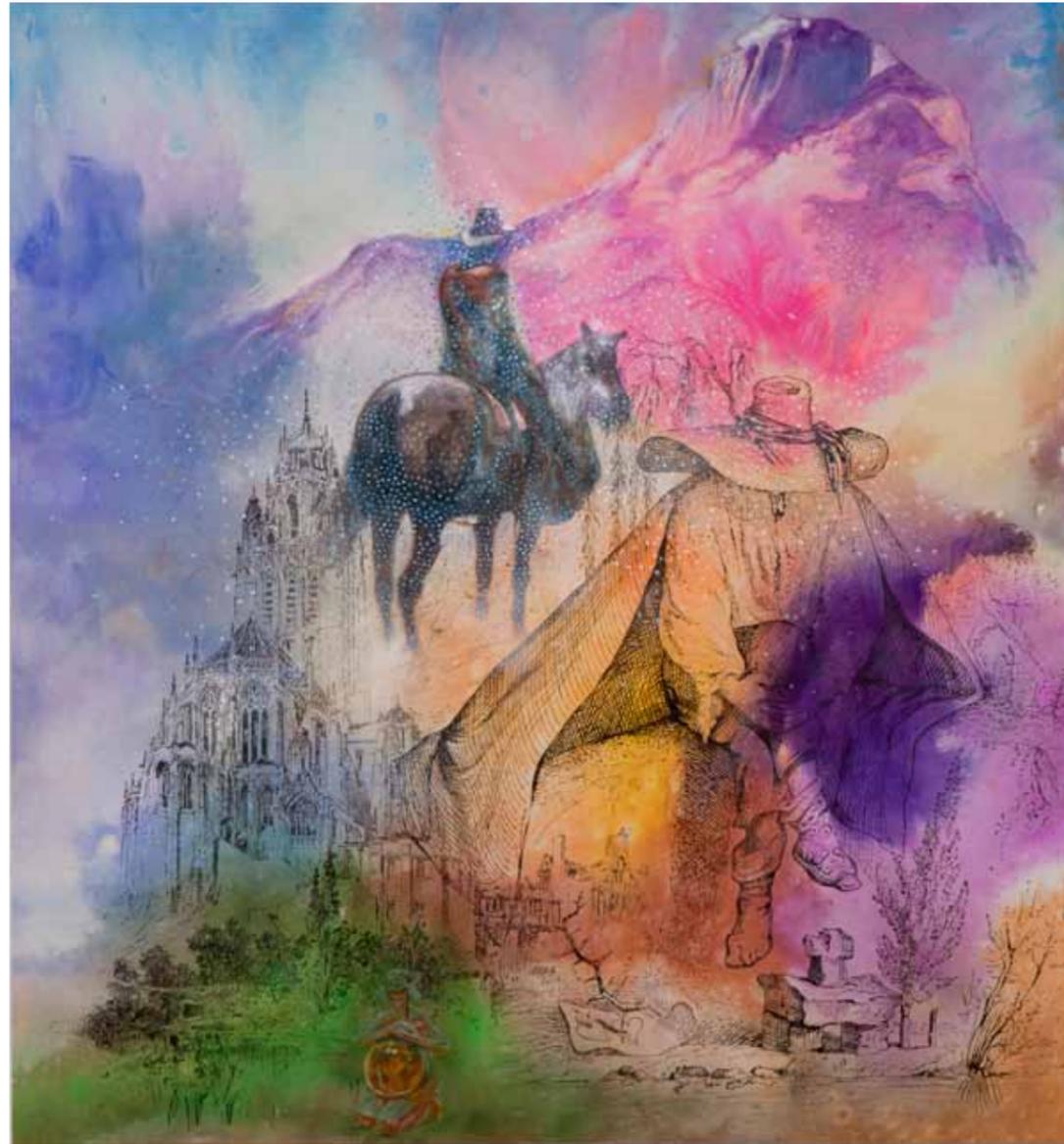
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Window Pain, 2011, wood, canvas, glass, c-print, brass, fabric, metal and plastic, 274 x 183 x 15.2 cm, photography courtesy of Andrea Rosen Gallery, Blum & Poe, BC, Kai Kai Kiki, and White Cube

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*Lonely are the free (pasadena dreamer), 2011,
india ink, pencil, watercolour, acrylic and lacquer on canvas, 254 x 235 cm*



Funny He Never Married, 2012, oil, varnish and silkscreen on canvas, 233x 190.5 cm



Starlita Walker, 2011, polystyrene foam, acrylic resin, acrylic paint and epoxy putty, 150 x 81.3 x 63.5 cm, photography courtesy of Andrea Rosen Gallery, Blum & Poe, BQ, Kaiikai Kiki, and White Cube.



One day we will follow the birds, 2011, polystyrene foam, acrylic resin, acrylic paint, epoxy putty, wood, plastic, suit, shoes, wristwatch, ceramic, string, fabric, two loudspeakers, amplifier, MP3 player and soundtrack, Dimensions variable, photography courtesy of Andrea Rosen Gallery, Blum & Poe, BQ, Kaiikai Kiki, and White Cube



The Past is a Foreign Country, 2011.
polystyrene foam, acrylic resin, acrylic, aluminum, plywood, fabric, plastic, electric motors. 216 x 150 x 150 cm,
photography courtesy of Andrea Rosen Gallery, Blum & Poe, BQ, Kaitai Kiki, and White Cube

I'd rather be homesick than be at home

— *You say that, but the word 'nostalgia' makes it into nearly every critic's description of your work. Is there a connection between what they're seeing and your desire to leave the place you're from?*

You know that nostalgia used to be regarded as an illness in the 17th and 18th centuries: When Swiss soldiers went abroad and became depressed, they were diagnosed as having nostalgia. It was a sickness brought on by not being home. But I don't think I'm nostalgic. Nostalgia is the stuff of Civil War re-enactments. 'Homesickness,' maybe, is the better word. It's the engine for what I do. I like to feel homesick. It produces something within me that I can express. But I always say, 'I'd rather be homesick than be at home.'

— *[Referring to Kunath's vast collection of perfumes.] So do all of your perfumes symbolize the link between memory and scent?*

Oh, I'm a big perfume lover. I collect them, and I'm actually developing a perfume, now. It's called 'Distance'. It's just like what we're talking about: The perfume creates an olfactory distance between two people, because whoever is wearing the scent, keeps himself immersed in it. That's the distance of one's present. And then there is the distance of one's past — and my past, specifically, my distance from Germany. It has the melody of international heart-break, doesn't it? I find it very funny and romantic at the same time.

— *Do you consider this perfume project another artwork?*

I think of smells as invisible mobile sculptures. I wrote an essay about it, and that's how I became involved with the perfumier I'm working with, now. From New York, he sends me samples, I smell them, and we go back and forth. It's really fascinating, because how do you explain to a guy what you mean by: 'Oh, this one smells like my childhood.' So I find myself asking him silly stuff all the time, like 'How does an arrogant man smell?' or 'How does a sunset smell?'

— *How would you ultimately like 'distance' to smell?*

Part of it will be the way Germany smells to me: it will have

honey, because my old studio was in a former honey production plant. It will also have the smell of floor polish — that's the smell of my childhood in the East, the way the school always smelled. It will smell of old smoke, because I used to go out a lot. I don't any more. I completely changed my life, but I still remember the smell of a club in East Berlin the morning after: that smell of old smoke and spilled beer. I really like that. But the scent is also full of regrets, and there's so much power in that. I also want to smell turpentine and neroli — the orange blossom flower — and redwood, because I live in Pasadena, where my house is completely covered in redwood. The smell of sequoias, also, all that sweet old soul wood.

Last year, the perfumier kept sending me 'pretty' smells, like jasmine and birch, but that wasn't working out well. I told him, 'Give me something really disgusting.' But, of course, what does that mean? Finally, he sent me back a sample called 'Angel Hair'. It's all synthetic, but the smells are those of civet — strong musky smell secreted from the anal scent glands of a cat — and poop, sweat and milk. There's also the smell of burps and old hair, like an old person's scalp. It's really horrible. I'll let you smell it. I used to spray it on people and they'd get so pissed off.

— *Do you think of scent as another one of the media you work in?*

Actually, every painting has a smell. I spray the canvas with a bit of perfume each morning, but it only lasts for the day. So, if the smell is lavender, I'll spray some of it on the painting again before I work on it. And, besides, I don't think of work in terms of media. At a show, I don't want people to be able to distinguish between a photograph, a video, a sculpture and a painting. I want them to feel that it's all part of one emotion, or maybe it's better to say that it's all one song. You can't hear a good song if you only listen for the guitar part. But if you listen to all of it, it's capable of giving you a satisfaction or a memory, and it allows you to go back and forth between different times of your life, all within just three minutes. I try to do the same thing with my art.