

ON THE MIRROR STAGE

Klaus Merkel accompanied by Monika Baer,
Mimosa Echard, and David Medalla

The exhibition *On the Mirror Stage* places the work of Klaus Merkel (born in Heidelberg in 1953) at the center of a dialogue with three artists from different backgrounds and generations: Monika Baer (born in Freiburg in 1964), Mimosa Echard (born in Alès in 1986), and David Medalla (born in Manila in 1938, died in 2020). While there is a clear affinity between Baer and Merkel, rooted in the continuity of a German pictorial tradition, the connections with Medalla and Echard open up more unexpected fields of interpretation, allowing us to take a fresh look at Merkel's work.

Since the 1980s, Merkel has developed a systematic approach to painting, in which each work is constructed in relation to a whole. In the early 1990s, he reproduced, all of his paintings produced between 1988 and 1995 on seven large panels at a scale of 1:10. This body of work became an active archive, a reservoir of images from which he drew for his subsequent compositions, a means, in his own words, of „painting images with images.“ Comparable to abstract playing cards, these miniature paintings reappear from one painting to another in multiple forms: isolated, juxtaposed, superimposed, or scattered freely across the canvas. Painted on monochrome or gradient backgrounds, crisscrossed with grids or brushstrokes resembling flashes of light, they deploy a self-referential language that is rigorously systematic yet always open. Through the repetition of simple shapes such as diamonds, rectangles, and circles, and the use of varied textures, his work naturally lends itself to dialogue with other visual languages that share these same elementary structures.

It is this capacity for absorption, this porosity to external forms, that gives the exhibition its title. Inspired by the „mirror stage“ developed by Jacques Lacan in the 1940s, *On the Mirror Stage* views Merkel's painting as a process of identity construction. According to the psychoanalyst, children when they recognize themselves in an external image, either their own self in the mirror or that of a parent. The „I“ is thus formed from the outside. Transposed to Merkel's work, this idea describes a self-reflexive system in which each work is constructed in dialogue with other forms, drawn from her own corpus or the surrounding world. Placed here at the center of the stage, it becomes a space of resonance where the play of reflections and correspondences opens up new perceptions of his work.

This logic finds a direct echo in Monika Baer's paintings. While her work is more openly situated between figuration and abstraction, it is based like Merkel's on a reiteration of forms. In her series, conceived as ensembles, objects (matchboxes, bottles, banknotes, etc.) isolated against a monochrome or gradient background are valued less for their symbolic meaning than for their material presence. Their reappearance from one canvas to another produces an erosion of meaning comparable to the repetition of a word in the work of Austrian author Thomas Bernhard. Baer thus adopts an analytical approach, in which the elements of the painting (motif, background, frame, sign) become tools for reflecting on the conventions of painting and the gaze. In her two paintings *La chambre Claire* (2024) and *Photography* (2024) presented in the exhibition, this gesture takes on a literal meaning: small rectangular mirrors colored in a shade similar to that of the pink surface on which they are fixed reflect, like a photograph, the direct imprint of the world without commenting on it, fragmenting the surrounding space into changing visual fragments without hierarchy. When viewed alongside Merkel's work, what was previously a purely abstract construction suddenly takes on a reflective and concrete potential. In Merkel's works *24.05.05 Umbra* (2024) and *24.06.02 Subduct* (2024), the recurrence of the rectangular form and the presence of a grid crossed by colorful brushstrokes resembling beams of light produce a shimmering fragmentation effect. What Baer expresses through the mirror object, Merkel translates into purely pictorial terms. The painting becomes simultaneously surface and reflection, structure and apparition.

From Baer's analytical surface to David Medalla's vibrant flow, the gaze shifts from reflective work to that which conveys a cosmic pulsation. A multifaceted artist and pioneer of kinetic art, Medalla developed a practice in perpetual metamorphosis in the 1960s, ranging from figurative drawing to sculpture, performance to visual poetry. His famous *Cloud Canyons*, soap bubble machines, convey an organic and cosmic conception of creation, where matter becomes breath and energy. By combining a minimalist approach with an intuitive and informal practice, Medalla sought to transcend the rigidity of minimalism. In his work, form is never fixed; it is simultaneously generated and altered, becoming the theater of a ceaseless mutation of the visible. In *Two Lesbians in a Café at Montmartre in Paris* (1981), the quivering lines and intimacy of the subject open up a vibrant space, traversed by desire and movement. Faced with this effervescent universe, Merkel's *25.01.03 Shell* (2025) seems to soften its abstract rigor when conversing with Medalla's Parisian mise-en-scene. The grid transforms into a window, while the green-purple tubular shapes painted in an X pattern unfold like suspended branches. The space of the painting is no longer read as a closed plane, but as an energy field in unstable equilibrium where forms respond to each other, attract each other, and mutate. Medalla's diamond-eyed masks, like the vibrant rectangles of Merkel's *24.06.02 Subduct*, suggest a depth that is not only optical but psychic,

almost mediumistic. In this tension, Merkel's rigor meets Medalla's poetic flexibility: one translates into abstract terms what the other expresses in the language of desire and flow. Their works, each in its own way, develop a cosmology of painting, a way of making the painting a field of forces, a traversed space where the correspondences between architecture and cosmos, matter and spirit are replayed. The dialogue with Mimosa Echard finally reveals another dimension of Merkel's work, that of painting understood as an organic membrane informed by a technological system. In *Angoisse Mythique (La Théorie de l'évolution)* (2024), Echard composes a dense surface from fabric used to protect against electromagnetic waves, covered with aluminum foil grids and punctuated with photographs of shop windows populated by mannequins and objects. Altered by corrosive liquids, these oxidized images display a palette of metallic greens evoking both the information network and the biological organism. Often made from resins, plant fragments, or consumer objects, her works produce hybrid textures, oscillating between chemistry and alchemy. When viewed alongside a painting such as Merkel's *18.09.03 Master Slave System (Afterglow)* (2018), this logic of grids and superimposition reveals affinities based on the circulation of connected forms and signals. In Echard's work, the composition resembles an interface where the pictorial layers function as data, where the bright, acid colors are reminiscent of the light from screens or a chemical reaction. Her work, like Merkel's, questions the simultaneity and porosity between the organic and technological realms. While Merkel's structures remain rooted in a pictorial logic, and Echard explores the vulnerability of photography, both artists play with the superimposition and tension of layers and textures, creating a sensitive network where the biological meets the digital. By bringing these four artists together, *On the Mirror Stage* offers an exploration of the contact zones between abstraction and reality, between the system and the living. Merkel's painting appears as a matrix organism, capable of reflecting and dialoguing with other forms of expression. In the mirror game between Baer, Medalla, and Echard, it reveals itself not as a closed system, but as a space of interconnection between matter, thought, and image. Between structure and flow, order and energy, geometry and chemistry, *On the Mirror Stage* sketches a vision of painting as a field of continuous transformation, a living mirror where abstraction, far from closing in on itself, becomes a mode of access to the world.

Oriane Durand