

Mike Weiss Gallery

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Come to the Cabaret



Gutheil in her studio.

Courtesy Mike Weiss Gallery, New York

By Marisa Bartolucci

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When **Stefanie Gutheil** was a girl she was always painting. Art was what she was good at, not school. Yet she never thought seriously about becoming an artist. Growing up as she did in Kressbronn, a resort village on Lake Constance in southern Germany, bounded as much by tradition as by the alps, her horizons were limited. “It’s a place,” the 30-year-old Gutheil says in her lilting, Swabian-accented English, “where people expect you to do something *noooormal*.”

But this pretty, pixieish brunette wasn’t *noooormal*—not by Kressbronn’s standards, at least. Not only was she a budding artist, but she was gay. When she was 15, she “escaped” to Ulm, a nearby university town, which despite its postcard-pretty medieval architecture, happened to also have a Bauhaus-influenced design tradition. Trying to figure out what to do with her life, Gutheil thought



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graphic design might be a compromise career; however, she hated the hours spent in front of the computer screen. Inspired by the stone artistry of the city's fabled Gothic cathedral, she considered becoming a stonemason until she was discouraged by the guild's long waiting list for membership and the masons' scoffing at such a petite tomboy tackling their muscular trade.

Set design was a more realistic alternative, offering both creative and physical engagement. Before she committed herself, Gutheil decided to travel after graduating from high school. She headed to Australia and its vast horizons, only to discover that the wide-open spaces between its cities didn't hold enough "culture" for her taste.

Telling this story amuses Gutheil. She chuckles about journeying all the way down under when she could have found new lands—and cultural riches—in nearby France or Italy. After she returned home, she was still hungry for new sights and experiences, so she went off to Berlin, a bohemian paradise of cheap rents and freewheeling dreams. "And I'm still there," she says.

As you might have gathered, Gutheil arrives at life's destinations by roundabout routes. "I must learn by doing," she says with a giggle. "I'm not so good in theory." In fact, she typically becomes obsessed with things she once despised, like the color pink and eyes, both of which feature prominently in her recent paintings.

Like so many before her, Gutheil found a home in Berlin's gay club scene. She had "a very romantic idea" of tending bar or working at a shop and painting on the side, but an artist she met in a pub urged her to get serious and apply to art school. The encouragement ultimately led to Gutheil's attending Berlin's highly respected **Universität der Künste**. There she was energized by the lively artistic debates, the exposure to art history and theory, and the camaraderie of her talented studio mates. Painting went from a hobby to an all-encompassing vocation.

By the time Gutheil graduated with her MFA, in 2007, she was making figurative paintings in fauvist hues that satirized classical works. "I play with history," she says. "I take it and use it. It's a never-ending story, like cooking. And for cooking, you need passion."

A lover of collage, she applied patterned fabrics, embroideries, and foils to her paintings to give them a three-dimensional quality. She points out that it would be faster to paint these effects, but says, "I like texture." She also notes that "fabric is graphic, not art. I wanted to use it as part of my palette, like the way **Matisse** used cutouts." And like the French painter, she wants the effect to be light and joyous, without any hint of the effort involved.

Then one day a cow she was painting transmogrified into a creature that was a mix of "the comic book and expressionism." She stayed with this subconscious eruption, and from her brush appeared a picture of weird creatures and monsters. Gutheil channeled a visual language of vibrant grotesquerie, part **Brueghel**, part **Bosch**, part **Grosz**, and all her own. Excited by what was emerging, for the next year and a half she worked in a creative frenzy, painting over finished canvases while conserving bits and pieces of the originals. These palimpsest collages, strong in graphic imagery, told definite stories that nevertheless were open to every viewer's interpretation. Unlike her old neighbors in Kressbronn, Gutheil is not interested in dictating to anybody.

"This is not Conceptual art," she says of these paintings, in case you had any doubt. "Kopftheater" (theater of the mind), as she calls the series, was "created very much in the moment. While I have a composition in mind, there are accidents. I like imperfect things, but done in a perfect way."

Collectors have responded to her **Rabelais-meets-Otto Dix** vision. When she made her U.S. debut, at the Scope booth of New York's **Mike Weiss Gallery** last December, 14 of the paintings in the



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“Kopftheater” series sold within four days, to buyers like the Japanese art dealer **Masashi Shiobara** and the well-known collectors **Marti** and **Tony Oppenheimer**, purchasing on behalf of the **Nerman Museum of Contemporary Art**, in Overland Park, Kansas. (She currently has a show up at Mike Weiss Gallery, closing February 20.)

“The paintings are the stories of my life,” Gutheil says. “What happens every day.” The figures of the rabbit, the fish, and the fly are people in disguise, and those characters with big noses and ears represent the false faces Gutheil sees on people at parties. The imagery she borrowed from the allegorical masks worn by actors in medieval plays, in which a Pinocchio nose might represent a liar, a big mouth a gossip, and so on. “They are the monsters we all have inside of us,” she says. And she finds their depiction therapeutic: “I’m in the homosexual scene, but I don’t want to do homosexual or emancipation art. I want to do art for me, for my emancipation. It’s serious fun. And in a way it’s political.”

Gutheil admits to sometimes being slow at deciphering the symbols in her own work. Three of her most startling canvases, titled *Berg* (“mountain”), depict massifs of shit animated by creatures within them. It took a while, she says, for her to recall the Swiss Alps her family used to gaze at while watching the sunset. Her father later told her that one of the fairy-tale mountains capped with snow was honeycombed with tunnels that, during World War II, held a stockpile of armaments to protect the Swiss from a German attack.

The peak, it turned out, wasn’t so pretty after all. Now when Gutheil looks at her painted mounds, she hears raspberry sounds. “Not because I eat beans,” she laughs. “The mountain is ugly, but it’s funny too.”

Mountains, alas, like people, may not always be what they seem, but Stefanie Gutheil can at least turn them into paintings.