

Tanya Leighton



Elif Saydam *Free Market* 2020 23-karat gold,
ink-jet transfer and oil on canvas
30 x 21 cm; COURTESY TANYA LEIGHTON, BERLIN
PHOTO GUNTER LEFKOWSKI

ELIF SAYDAM

Tanya Leighton, Berlin

“Die Miete ist zu hoch!!!” (The rent is too high!!!) declares a cartoon banner in *Artists (Kotti)*, one in a series of A4-size oil paintings presented in Elif Saydam’s “Gut Feeling” (all works 2020). The banner dangles from an arched window garlanded with flowers and lemons. At the base of the canvas, below a lavish cascade of gold leaf, is an anthropomorphized yellow insect carrying a briefcase emblazoned with the imperative “STRIKE!”

The street scene, set in Berlin’s lively, migrant-rich Kottbusser Tor, explicates the social concerns that underlie Saydam’s formal engagement with ornamentation and Ottoman miniatures. Caricatures of bugs, often allegorizing artists, recur throughout the works. *Artists (gossip)* shows a klatch of wasps, while *Artists (rotten)* includes two hungry asparagus-green mosquitoes. Their images, pretty but menacing, have been appropriated from insect-repellent products. These endearing bottom-feeders, complicit in their own fumigation, indicate culture’s co-opted role in class struggles against gentrification.

Saydam, a painter and performer who participates in various DIY publishing collectives, composes these works on textile designs transferred to canvases, and details them with emblems (such as smiling, sparkly star stickers), copper, silver and 23-karat gold. Layering, noticeable through the faded, palimpsestic presence of flowers in certain backgrounds, offers a processual conceit for the themes of pleasure and plenty explored in the exhibition. The cornucopia, which since antiquity has symbolized nourishment and prosperity, is deconstructed in many of the paintings. Fruit and flowers dance across surfaces, while the dilated pupils of smiley stickers in *Testosterone* point to the excess that animates Germany’s capital. Saydam’s paintings may be a feast for the eyes, but they are digested in the stomach.

As meditations on consumption, the paintings in “Gut Feeling” evoke what Georges Bataille called the “accursed share,” the waste and glut that must lusciously and non-productively be dissipated in the arts, or risk being refigured as war. This tension is encapsulated in *Bind*, a neat grid of 16 canvases installed high on one wall of the gallery’s office. The word *progress* is spelled out backwards and mirrored in gilt letters across the eight upper canvases; the same word is then flipped upside-down on the eight lower ones. It reads as an indictment of the growth ideology that steers neoliberalism and, by extension, the art market. Yet what is progress in this economy, brutishly centred as it is upon precarity and dispossession? Against this existential dilemma, “Gut Feeling” looked at artists as figure of ornament and decoration, reminding us that margins, like guts, are sites of critical, intuitive abundance. —HARRY BURKE

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