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Surrealism shrouds German artist Michael Sailstorfer's new show in Dubai

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At first glance, Michael Sailstorfer's show *We Love Them All* is quite classical. Handmade ceramic masks, reminiscent of Oceanic or African statuary, are mounted in a neat line. Jagged, geometrical forms suggest noses or the tops of angular heads; circular depressions evoke eyes and mouths. But look towards the back wall and look up: high on a white pedestal three meters tall is a taxidermied cat, sitting on its hind legs. Its head is slightly craned upward, towards a strip light illuminating the gallery.

"It was necessary to open up some questions, rather than giving answers," the Berlin artist explains about his decision to set the cat among ceramics. "It turns the exhibition into something more surrealistic. I had the image of [German-born Swiss surrealist] Meret Oppenheim gluing plates with fur. Here you also have the contrast of the fur of the cat and the surface of the ceramics."

This is his second exhibition in Dubai. A quintessentially global artist, he keeps up a regular roster of exhibitions and biennials; he participated in the Sharjah Biennial 8 in 2007. His projects often involve large-scale installations that work with different textures. Though they might look monumental or purely visual at first, they unfold into different experiences and memories: he is a master of sensations – using the tactility of cat fur, for example, to make his masks seem smoother and less lifelike in comparison.

In one work, he created a popcorn machine that heated kernels to bursting point throughout of the exhibition, so that buttery yellow popcorn flooded the gallery space. "When you entered the exhibition space, already at the entrance door you had the smell of popcorn in your nose," he says. "It caught your thoughts and your imagination, and you start to think about cinemas or your childhood."

He used car tyres for other pieces, making enormous tree-like sculptures, or covered building facades with the lashed rubber objects. Dust would spread out from the tyres out all over the exhibition space, affecting the air itself. Sailstorfer calls these works "extroverted", while he labels the cat, which he first made for a 2007 show at Kunsthalle Düsseldorf, an "introvert."

"It's very self-contained: it's about the interaction of the cat and the light bulb," he says. "It's almost like he could be doing yoga or a meditation." Sailstorfer pauses, and laughs at the idea. "The masks could be something that occurs in the meditation of the cat."

The masks reach back to the history of exchange between modern sculpture and traditional ceremonial objects. Sailstorfer sculpted them in clay, and applied different colours and glazes, from a faux-marble effect to an almost wood-like black. They appear flat and heavy on the wall, and though they are installed at eye-height, it is hard to imagine anyone wearing them. Then again, maybe the cat could.