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## INSIDE PHILIP MUELLER'S DREAMS

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Though he employs symbols imbued with universal meanings, Viennese painter Philip Mueller subverts traditional associations through stylistic renderings, allowing each symbol to take on a life of its own. His canvases (and surfboards and leather jackets) depict classically posed figures, often inspired by the work of Michelangelo, in dreamlike, woodsy settings, alongside swans, crosses, skulls, and Batman masks. In his current solo show "Dreams in Blue. The Year Philip Mueller Didn't Wake Up," which is on view at Carbon 12 gallery within Alserkal Avenue in Dubai, he exhibits a Batmanmasked man holding a fork storming toward a dead swan; two men, with masks lying beside them, lounging in the woods enjoying a barbecue; and an actual leather jacket bearing the words "Black Flamingo Not Sad Boy," hinting at the physical presence of a fictional gang. Though one might expect titles to be emblematic or explain some of Mueller's references, instead they are taken from Viennese coffee houses.

"All of the sketches are done in coffee houses," Mueller says when we meet him at Carbon 12. "If I'm doing my office work or something, I'm always also doing it at coffee houses—drinking wine, eating Schnitzel, or something like that."

The fact that his titles reflect his initial process hints at a larger recurring theme within the 27yearold's seemingly abstract dreamscapes: Mueller's works are not based on fictional stories, but rather autobiographical information, and as a whole, represent his personal utopia. Mueller, who was born and raised in Vienna, spends as much time as possible in the countryside. He dreams of a slow, relaxed life away from the city, yet can't leave the city behind. "I will always come back. It's my city. It's my rules," he says. "It's very cozy. It feels like home."

EMILY MCDERMOTT: I want to ask about Black Flamingo. I know it's a gang you made up, but when did you first come up with it?

PHILIP MUELLER: About a half of a year ago, before I started this series. It just came to my mind. They're living in this utopia, my utopia. It's all autobiographical stuff, and they're the unconscious side, living the beautiful life, like myself. I always have to come out of this [unconscious state] and be reachable all the time. It's kind of Biedermeier and very Romantic. So I made up this gang that is able to live this slow life all the time. They're outlaws. They don't do anything. They work for nobody, no authority. But maybe the most important part is that they are not hurting anyone. They're giving nothing, but also they are taking nothing.

MCDERMOTT: What brings them pleasure or happiness?

MUELLER: Eating well, and a lot. Hunting, I love it. Beautiful cars. Everything natural.

MCDERMOTT: So when you start a painting, what is the initial catalyst?

MUELLER: This was quite a new process for me. I started strictly with composition starters [that are exhibited as Kompositionstudien #1], so I was trying out structure, the colors I would use, compositions, and symbolic elements. Before, the canvas was lying on the floor of my studio and there was partying and after three days there be destruction, because of stuff that happened. The paintings evolved themselves because of this destruction. But now, it was very strict. I started with those and the sketches by the entrance. Then I put them on the canvas. It's something very grownup for me. It's also interesting for the viewer to know where everything comes from.

MCDERMOTT: Can you tell me about the significance of swans for you?

MUELLER: They are the enemies of the Black Flamingos because they are arrogant animals. The Black Flamingos are eating swans [in Espresso Rosi BFSB]. I tried swan last summer and if you eat swans, you have to eat swans that are a maximum of fourmonths old. Otherwise, they get really tough.

MCDERMOTT: Wait, you actually ate swan?

MUELLER: The Queen also does it! Did you know that there are guys in England and twice a year they have to count all of the swans living in England? They have a list of them, because all swans belong to the Queen and they are eating them. So for me, the swan stands for this arrogance. It's only the outside that is beautiful.

MCDERMOTT: And on The Jacket, why did you paint the phrase "Black Flamingo Not Sad Boy?"

MUELLER: You can't be sad all the time! [laughs] It's the gang jacket. They have surfboards, too.

MCDERMOTT: You've used surfboards as material before. The surfboard, for you, represents the idea of freedom, right?

MUELLER: Yeah. I'm working with these symbols—the jacket or the surfboard or a color—that are so heavily loaded with thoughts and myths in our civilization. So if I put them in another context, people maybe begin to build new stories in their heads. It's quite easy, but that makes the work strong.

MCDERMOTT: Have you always used the Batman figure?

MUELLER: No, but I have always used masks. You know, the persona, it covers something, but because of the covering it makes the speech louder. That's an idea from Greek theater. I chose the Batman mask for this series because it is so well known. You only have to see the silhouette and you know what it is: a mask and a persona. The mask was so important for me and it's the bestknown mask in pop culture.

MCDERMOTT: Did you grow up watching cartoons, like Batman?

MUELLER: Not Batman, actually. More Asterix, Gaston—all the French comics. But I don't speak French, just a little Italian and very bad English.

MCDERMOTT: Aside from autobiographical and pop culture references, what inspires you?

MUELLER: I read a lot. I was reading a lot of Romantic works in the last years. It's so cheesy, but it's so heavy on the other side—Lord Byron, I love it. But the most influence comes through everyday life, just living each day. That's the most honest way.

MCDERMOTT: I read that growing up you were always interested in art, but do you remember a specific artist or experience that really impacted you?

MUELLER: It was always about drawing and painting. Those were always my interests. But then it got very specific when I was working for Hermann Nitsch six or seven years ago. That was really important; I quit university and went to him. Before that I was learning from Stoimen Stoilov and Walter Strobl, but I was a child back then. Working with Nitsch was so intense. It was 24/7, out in this castle and all over the world. I learned things you can't learn in university—about dealing with collectors, making up shows, processes, how art comes to be a Gesamtkunstwerk like his.

MCDERMOTT: How did you start working for Nitsch?

MUELLER: I was working for Paul Renner, another Austrian artist. I spent a lot of time in Italy with him and they are good friends. He was maybe Nitsch's first assistant back in the '70s and he told Nitsch, "Come on, work with Philip because he's a good worker." [laughs] It's about working, you know? It's just about that.

MCDERMOTT: But you quit working for him after one and a half years, whereas many of his assistants stay for seven or eight years...

MUELLER: Yeah, that was a very important moment. There was no time for myself and for my own work, so I quit.

MCDERMOTT: What is your process like? Do you live in your studio, or are they separated?

MUELLER: Two years ago, I took this huge flat because I wanted to have my studio and flat in one, but that did not work out. Then the hard times started. Now I have a new studio in Vienna that's a huge loft where I can work; this whole series was done there. I listen to music—there are some Wagner elements in here. He's the best because he's so heavy. Sometimes I want to throw up because it's so deep inside your soul.

MCDERMOTT: When you say the hard times started, what do you mean?

MUELLER: Things had been messy, but more problems came because the flat was so expensive. I was really broke. I also need to have a space between sleeping and working, so it didn't work out. I was partying 24/7. But then I got the new studio and like this [snaps] everything was good again. I guess I needed this pause. There had to be a cut.

MCDERMOTT: Can you tell me about the title of the exhibit, "Dreams in Blue. The Year Philip Mueller Didn't Wake Up?"

MUELLER: It's about this pause, actually. It's about this year where I did nothing, just dreaming. There is not a strict story behind the paintings, but when I went to the conscious side, it's those scenes or situations. We were hunting and did this huge barbecue [which is depicted in Café Zartl]. These elements, these stories, the combination of them in the painting are hints for the viewers to build their own stories. There's enough stuff to build 100 stories.

MCDERMOTT: How do pop culture references, like Batman, influence you compared to autobiographical information?

MUELLER: It's quite easy to work with those symbols because they're everywhere around us. If I'm driving back to the hotel, I see Batman or Robin at least one time on my phone or on the street, even in Dubai. It's in all of our heads, permanently. Putting them in another context—I've never seen Batman chilling in the woods having a barbecue—that's the joke and you can build your own happiness, your own utopia out of those jokes.

MCDERMOTT: Can you tell me about Café Landtmann BFS...5, the winter painting? There are so many story lines going on. Something made both the man and dog stop in their tracks, and then Batman is lurking in the background...

MUELLER: They are looking in three different directions: Batman is looking at the man, the man is looking at us, and the dog is looking somewhere else. The man is looking straight at us, we made him stop, but his eyes are gone. The flag is the Black Flamingo's flag, but it's an antiflag; they wouldn't need one. This cabin is where the gang lives. They are always in the countryside.

MCDERMOTT: I wanted to ask why the paintings are all set in the woods, because you grew up and live in a city...

MUELLER: Yes, but I'm spending a lot of time in cabins. For instance, Espresso Rosi BFSB depicts the cabin of my girlfriend's parents. We always go there if we have time. It's very important for me to get away from the fast shit.

MCDERMOTT: Back to Café Landtmann—it looks like there might be something in the window. It's glowing a kind of peach color...

MUELLER: The first painting [in the exhibit, Kaffee Urania BFSB] is actually the view inside the cabin.

MCDERMOTT: And the figure in Kaffee Urania resembles Jesus. Why is Jesus inside the Black Flamingos' cabin?

MUELLER: Most of the figures are taken from Michelangelo's sculptures, so Kaffee Urania is a mixture of a painting and sculpture by him. It was very influenced by Michelangelo's work. But there's also this bar—they play a big role in my life, bars. [laughs] So there had to be at least one in the series. I really like the texture of this painting, too; it's like an old, broken fresco. I did it with oil and then went over it with acrylic, which dries faster, so that's when the texture comes from. I was really surprised that it worked.

MCDERMOTT: It's just so strange to have this Jesus figure sitting at a bar, especially with an image of what seems to be a stripper underneath.

MUELLER: By coincidence, there was this fashion magazine from '88 lying around my studio. It's my year of birth. And you know those bars that are covered with posters? I decided to put one poster of an image from the magazine on the bar. It fits very well, in a narrative and compositional way, because it's so open.

MCDERMOTT: So everything is autobiographical, but also appears very dreamlike. How would you describe your approach or philosophy toward painting?

MUELLER: It's important that it's not political or journalistic, but a purely aesthetic way of impressing. That keeps it interesting forever because everything around us is changing so fast all the time. Spreading happiness through aesthetic work is one of the most beautiful things. I'm really happy and I know I should be happy about the fact that I can do this. That's it.

MCDERMOTT: Do you always remember your dreams?

MUELLER: No, I'm actually not dreaming that much, or I can't remember. It's only if I'm dry that I'm dreaming and can remember—and that's not that often. [laughs] The last dream I remember was the night before I came here. I was dreaming about the exhibition, but it was very different. I remember I met Ben Stiller here and he had a new movie. And I don't watch Ben Stiller movies. But then he said, "You have to come to the premiere, but the ticket will cost \$1 million." I was ice skating through the exhibition with him. It was really realistic. It was kind of ugly...