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Philip Mueller: Last Days of Soft Machine

By [Nadine Khalil](#)

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The *Last Days of the Soft Machine* is over but celebrations are never-ending. In Philip Mueller's anti-heroic world, an epic saga of debauchery unfolds in Alpine woods and prison islands. The 32-year-old Austrian painter depicts hedonistic scenes in desolate, often vandalized places where humans and animals (gorillas, flamingos, wild cats, and the odd black swan) cohabit. Some paintings feature humans, inspired by Mueller's entourage, usually undressed, masked like ghosts in a mix between horror and entertainment. In others, Mueller's alter-ego, Phyllis, is a painted apparition-like gorilla.

As Mueller's world is captured in a drunken disarray, the sense of an aftermath emerges—that still-raging afterparty. Small fires are ablaze, vintage cars are wrecked and Greco-Roman statues have lost their glory. In a neo-Romantic style juxtaposed with anarchist symbols, vaguely Fascist typography layers buildings, helmets, and skin.

While so much of the scenography can be perceived as fiction, the locales are real. They are drawn from the artist's life and the circle of friends he named the Black Flamingo Sad Boys (BFSB) one day in 2015, when they were hunting swans on a lake in Austria. This group began appearing in his paintings, and since 2017, they have been lurking near the abandoned prison on Santo Stefano near Capri, an island that's officially for sale and where Mueller used to visit with his father as a child. In *Dogdays at Santo Stefano* (2020), a building marked with "NATURAL LAW" and "TIBE DREAM" references the Tiberio "anti-beach resort" established by the BFSB gang, which is now reaching the end of its role in the overarching narrative.

"The BFSB are moving on from there," Mueller explains from a rented former courthouse in Tauernhof in southern Austria. "They hold the keys to several parts of the world, separated from the craziness and conventions of our society. So their story will continue, but somewhere else." The next stop will be the Greek island of Naxos, where he's rented another place near an abandoned hotel. "It will be isolated and stormy and I imagine myself there just with my dog, harpoon, and the wild sea."

When we speak, Mueller explains that the 1430 courthouse he's staying in is surrounded by a forest. "It's so quiet that you can even hear your heartbeat," he says. "I got sick recently and had these fever dreams and heard voices ... you know they burned 15 witches here." Interestingly, his works—situated between historical narrative and theater, violence and delirium—capture that haunted quality. "There's an autobiographical element to the paintings, but I also wish to be in the situations that I paint." While he likes to work in a solitary fashion, the drama in his social life translates into his work.

In one painting for example, a woman holds a rifle to an unfazed pink flamingo. In another, a nude, tattooed woman is riding a bull in a state of collapse. "We're living in such a decadent time, but people are not aware of it. This work represents tearing everything down. I imagined my favorite cars racing 24/7 and blowing up the last oil reserves, for no reason." Santo Stefano actually has its own car circuit, which Mueller has used as the setting for senseless annihilation. While he is influenced by Russian Decadence, Mueller also comments on capitalist accumulation. His figures live with excess and neglect; they consume and destroy.

The first painting Mueller made when he was 17 featured himself triumphantly riding a fish in the sky, above Gilbert & George, and he hasn't lost his derision. One of his first jobs was an apprenticeship with Hermann Nitsch, the Viennese Actionist known for his blood-splattered paintings and corporeal performances. "I learned a lot from Hermann, I love his work. I was glad to get out after two years though ... we're still good friends."

Mueller remembers taking nude drawing classes when he was 11 and visiting artist ateliers while his friends went to soccer training. "I wanted to do something where I didn't need to be in charge of anyone else," he says, now with near 500 paintings to his name. Mueller is a prolific artist, and it's easy to forget how young he is though some of BFSB's symbols of legitimacy—portraits on surfboards, graffitied paraphernalia like leather jackets and helmets—seem immature, trivializing his visual lexicon.

His latest body of work references *The Soft Machine* by William Burroughs. *Äskulap down!* (2020) is a stunning blue mural of Asclepius, the Greek god of medicine and healing, from whose toppled head symbolically rises a snake literally marked with Burroughs' title. "SMASH THE CONTROL MACHINE" reads from one cheek. Though spelling the obvious, "it evokes questions of where we are going," Mueller notes.

This machinic death drive channels another Greco-Roman protagonist, the timekeeper, Kronos. He appears in a blazing red painting of glory and turbulence, *Kronos Comes Across Santo Stefano* (2020) and in *Autodromo di Castel d'Oro #3* (2020), propped atop a 1990s Porsche 959 car wreck bearing a Molotov cocktail. These Greek myths have lived with Mueller. "They function as a mirror, they explain everything we are going through. When Christianity spread, they were telling the same stories but in a more brutal way. Nowadays, the mirror is more abstract."

Mueller's mirror to society shows ruin and revelry, a level of indulgence indicating nothing is sacred and everything is ephemeral. Intoxication is matched with defilement and an aura of tragedy. We find Mueller's uninhibited characters in a post-apocalyptic scenario, where they reject the trappings of discipline and work. He has moved from his more typical Hieronymus Bosch-like landscapes to a hyperreality, where craggy islands have aquamarine pools and false idols occupy space with decaying structures and histories. In a way, this world seems unfathomable today—it belongs to the past and somehow, to an escapist future, currently out of reach.