

Volker Hüller

Wasteland

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Nothing comes out of nowhere

Text by von Dr. des. Ina Jessen

An old exhaust pipe and a propped-up car tyre stand in the space, the fragmented relics of a once-mobile vehicle. Volker Hüller chose them as the motifs for his sculptural installation, produced in his New York studio in summer 2021. This suggestive waste material, with the object-, motif- and material-specific references it makes, is the subject of the artist's current exhibition *Wasteland* at Produzentengalerie Hamburg. The end of things implies a beginning and a development involving processes of aging and decaying. The objects strewn around the space transmit the ambivalence of materiality and decay directly into the viewer's subjective consciousness. The impasto-surrounded sculptures manifest an organic seeming finiteness. At the same time, the iridescent, smooth surfaces reflect an abstract likeness of their evident nature as objects, poised toward the future.

Wasteland shows paper works, paintings, collages, assemblages, and sculptural elements. Volker Hüller's entire oeuvre is characterised by the interweaving of various art forms. He restricts himself neither to one medium, nor one style, nor one material but sees himself as a painter who is free to produce and exhibit sculptural works as well. His paper works, for instance, might consist of a substrate of collage that he covers with silk and paints over in oils. The validity of Hüller's materials and media is founded in precisely this approach, which calls to mind the art-historical phenomenon of *paragons*. Any assertion of the one or other's greater relevance is naturally subverted by the artist's equal use of them, and his ascribing them equal value. Accepting and embracing all, Hüller approaches the contest between the arts with a reception and style of composition that seems almost deescalating. Art-historical and painterly categorisations play a role in Volker Hüller's artistic self-conception only insofar as, in his view, modernism is an integral part of the background that cannot be ignored. We cannot avoid considering forms of the art-historical past, especially of the late 19th century, as they are causally linked to the form(ation) of the present. *Nothing comes out of nowhere*; we are caught between the past and the future, where the present is constituted. Hüller's works speak of this temporal process. And of transformations – they inspire him and are manifested in his blend of art forms, materials, and motifs. Indeed, he himself points to active processes when he says:
I am interested in what happens!

The figurative and the abstract work together quite naturally in Hüller's objects, embedded in rounded contexts of material contrasts and an oscillation between sculpture and painting, textile- and paper-based work. The field of tension that Volker Hüller generates with experimental curiosity in his works is echoed in the curatorial choreography of the current exhibition. Hüller's abstract forms are always derived from figurative origins, which he distils by a process of successive abstraction. Hüller, then, applies a method of developing works that defies the modernist approach of exclusively abstract or exclusively figurative painting.

Volker Hüller says of himself that he is fixated on surfaces. Esoteric surfaces, which on reception focus all the viewer's experiences and are the cause of every quick (and perhaps hasty) judgement, could already be seen, disrupted by formalist materials such as PVC, in the artist's early collages made when still a student at the Hamburg University of Fine Arts.

By layering monochrome, equally abstract and figurative works, and combining different material surfaces, Volker Hüller opens windows on to apparently multi-dimensional spheres. Various textile fragments stuck on canvases are placed in relation to one another, welded and congealed. In this way, Hüller emphasises the beauty in entanglement and, to some extent, the morbidity. His overlapping canvas and textile fragments form axial compositions that generate a sense of depth. But the material lines break down the esoteric, and the cut edges and rawness of the contrasting materials contradict the sense of depth. The viewer sees the sober dimensional reality of each object; the suggestion of visual depth arising from the play with materials and sculptural layering is gone.

In the predominantly green-toned work 12:40, an arm stretches up from the lower picture edge on to the canvas, seems to slide down from the centre of the picture surface and slip. Paint tracks, blotches and what look like drag marks suggest a formative instability. Long outstretched fingers incorporate flesh tones, oscillating between shades of purple, brown and pink, while Hüller's formations give the surface a relief-like character. On the matt green substrate with its textile and painterly contrasts, the glazed hand presents an iridescent structural contrast. The hand, alongside the face, is one of the human body's most expressive parts and a clearly figurative element to which Volker Hüller frequently returns. In the current assemblages, the hand is both a foreign body and a unifying element, forging a link between the viewer and the picture. But equally, it exposes the distance between them, and testifies to the two-dimensional surface of the image.

Hüller reduces the forms of his motifs and successively abstracts them. Body parts, a recurring theme in his paintings and graphics, now also appear in his sculptural works in the form of ceramic hands and arms. They are linked by a common motif vocabulary and their objectively un-equal materials. For instance, piles of sawdust and straw are placed alongside a mesh of paper strands, a mass of stuck-together canvas fragments, pieces of rough linen, and figurative pottery.

Normative categorisations of materials as valuable or non-valuable prompt differentiation between everyday found materials and refuse from clay, for instance, known as a '*primal sculptural material*'¹ and the raw material for producing ceramics – a cultural asset. In other of Hüller's works, car tires or decades-old stuffed birds, which the artist acquired in Britain, serve as metaphors of endurance and impermanence. Their everyday character is contrasted against the concept of the high-status sculptural art object. The ephemeral is not only juxtaposed against the lasting, but the individual elements also contrast with each other. The 20th century's broader concept of art seems to have provided the template. Piles of everyday materials, incorporating chance and temporality, tell of a hierarchical congruence as well as an immanent impermanence, morbidity, and the non-assurance that a static art object will produce critical reception and comment. Comparisons with earlier artists who worked with similar materials, such as the Swiss artist Diether Roth (1930-1998), seem to confirm this and highlight the artist's epistemological interest in the processual.

¹ Lexikon des künstlerischen Materials. Werkstoffe der modernen Kunst von Abfall bis Zinn, ed. by Monika Wagner, Dietmar Rübél and Sebastian Hackenschmidt, München 2010, s. v. *Ton* (Monika Wagner).

Volker Hüller's works are concerned with creating a specific situation and less with a real or verifiable narrative arising from them. Actions are suggested. That is, a narrative is set but does not, and is not intended to, lead anywhere. It is conceived for and held out in prospect to the viewer so that anyone receiving the work can find, develop, and experience their own story, complete with interaction, in it.

Together, the title of the show *Wasteland* and the exhibits displayed in the Produzentengalerie Hamburg create a patina over both the remaining and the forward-looking. By personally directing the creative process for his objects, from selecting the exhibits to deciding how the exhibition is hung, Volker Hüller provides the open narrative of a *Wasteland* and offers it to the visitors, for them to linger, take a close look, and develop their own story from their reception.

Based on a conversation between Volker Hüller in New York and Ina Jessen in Hamburg on 28 August 2021.