

Franz Kapfer

*Atlanten – Ich oder das Chaos*

22. 6. – 1. 9. 2024

Press talk: 21. 6. 2024, 10 am

Opening: 21.6.2024, 6 pm

HALLE FÜR KUNST Steiermark

Burgring 2, 8010 Graz (AT)

Cooperation: Landeszeughaus Graz, Universalmuseum Joanneum

Prolog to the opening: 21.6.2024, 5 pm

Posterbook available

Curator:

Jan Tappe

History does not only shape the present; the after-effects of the supposed past that we feel echoing in our current times will also stretch far into the future. Mythical narratives inscribe themselves into society and its political bodies, which in turn influence whose stories are told and whose remain untold. In his research and interpretation of objects overloaded with historical signifiers, Franz Kapfer investigates methods of historiography and scrutinizes how these approaches may be used and misused both politically and by the media. His works thus reveal the political dimension of historic symbols, ciphers and monuments as well as their influence on today's societies and their composition.

As part of the *Province of Styria's appreciation prize for visual arts 2022*, Kapfer will realize a group of new large-format works dealing with the mythological figure and sculptural tradition of Atlases. Drawing from this titanic sky bearer of Greek mythology, Atlases are male, muscular and larger-than-life architectural figures, often appearing as carved pillars supporting the threshold of a building. Kapfer's newly produced installation will be shown alongside older works by the artist, providing a comprehensive overview of the artist's methodology. In a combination of new and old works, the exhibition constitutes retrospectively a representative selection of the artist's oeuvre to date.

Shown in Austria for the very first time, these relevant groupings of work open up a narrative extending across detailed constructions of an entrance gate commissioned by Napoleon and containing his insignia at the Louvre in Paris, the Lion Fountain in honor of Alexander the Great in Skopje, and elements of temple complexes used by the North Korean dictatorial family to establish a dynastic succession. The result is a complex web of stories, which condense into a metaphor interrogating architecture, representation, power and its abuse.

Following a long and in-depth research project preceding the exhibition and involving trips of several months in Mexico City, Kiev, Istanbul and Jerusalem, Kapfer links the Atlases as mythical world bearers with the equipment of contemporary (para-)military units from all over the world, illustrating how dictators, despots and totalitarian rulers repeatedly refer to a heroic, supposedly better past. The exhibition title *Atlanten – Ich oder das Chaos* (atlases – me or the chaos) not only relates to the annexation of the Ukrainian Crimea by Russia and Russia's war of aggression begun in February 2022, but also alludes to the political tendency of dictators with imperialist aspirations to stage themselves as the "strong man" and saviors of society.

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HALLE FÜR KUNST Steiermark, Burgring 2, 8010 Graz, Austria, +43 316 740084, [info@halle-fuer-kunst.at](mailto:info@halle-fuer-kunst.at), [halle-fuer-kunst.at](https://halle-fuer-kunst.at)  
Press contact: Mag. Helga Droschl, +43 316 740084-14, +43 664 3935718, [hd@halle-fuer-kunst.at](mailto:hd@halle-fuer-kunst.at)

Produced for the exhibition in an oversized scale, Kapfer's artifacts are made out of wood, thereby rebutting the association visitors might have of an actual operability, and being reduced to a symbolically charged gesture. Altered in dimension and volume, the figures appear strangely flat, similar to the other works in the exhibition, which resemble theater backdrops. Kapfer also draws from the historical culture of the Aztecs and the Toltecs, with reference to the Atlases of Tula, which he visited in Mexico and to which equally Mexican military units refer to through codes and patches attached on their uniforms. At four and a half meters high, the Tula figures provided the scale for Kapfer's entire installation. Reminiscent of pop art, this almost cartoon-like exaggeration and flatness reflects the overconfidence of autocratic rulers and sovereign powers who draw on mythological narratives to glorify themselves.

The *Province of Styria's appreciation prize for visual arts* is awarded biannually by the Province of Styria, with the decision being made by an expert jury, and includes a presentation at HALLE FÜR KUNST Steiermark. Jury member Rainer Fuchs justified Franz Kapfer's appraisal as follows: "In his installations, videos and performances, Franz Kapfer scrutinizes the historic and current rituals, which determine social life and its values in a mostly internalized form. We encounter these traditional and stereotypical clichés of power and truth in an aestheticized form in monuments and customs, but also in current political discourse. Kapfer reveals the often suppressed or denied power-political motives of religious and secular ideologies in their everyday and existential effects, without falling into a didactic or moralizing attitude."

In this way, Kapfer reveals that the "official" narratives of history and mythology are closely entangled with constructs understood in the following triad: Nation, Sovereignty and Territory. Sovereign power as violence on bodies may also be exercised by non-state groups that are in competition with state power or other non-state groups, within a territory or even on an international level.

Alongside the presentation at HALLE FÜR KUNST Steiermark, Kapfer is also staging an intervention at Landeszeughaus Graz, which houses an extensive collection of weapons from the early modern period in a historical arrangement. In the Landeszeughaus, the artist has installed ten large-format works of shaded paper stencils, which, being elevated, serve as constructional drawings of the darker sculptures of the *Atlases* exhibited in turn at HALLE FÜR KUNST. As a consequence, a line of conjugation is established between the two institutions, which thanks to a recourse to the past towards current representations of symbols of power, creates a powerful arch into our conflict-laden present.

Reflecting on the absurdity of these power fantasies by means of direct confrontation, Franz Kapfer proposes a pause for reflection and peaceful coexistence. By decoding symbols of might, he creates visual and haptic counter-narratives to official and traditional historiographies and the power structures associated with them. Through these disclosures, the monumental scale and exaggerated depiction of objects of power, Kapfer succeeds in making previously undiscovered ties visible, revealing what has often been deliberately suppressed.

Like a relentless artisan or concurrent archeologist, Kapfer maneuvers his way through history, uncovering symbols whose meanings have fallen into oblivion, cultivating his works from the ruins of the past. Since the past tirelessly catches up with our current time, archives and artifacts are fundamental to the present and our ability to shape the future. Kapfer reveals neglected facts, and smashes disturbing features in order to create something new.

The exhibition is accompanied by a poster book designed by the artist including a text by Roger M. Buerger (artistic director of documenta 12, among others), which documents Kapfer's research trips and re-localizes his works around the atlases.

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