

# Jonas BURGERT

Through his dark, grotesque explorations of the human condition, we find our souls—says ARSALAN MOHAMMAD

Photograph by PATRICK WACK

Jonas Burgert's paintings, in which surrealistic landscapes and figures exist in clashing, blaring neons and murky greys and blacks, have slithered into the global art market like dreadful bad dreams, establishing themselves as some of the most collectable and compelling art to have emerged from Germany in recent years. These vast canvases see grotesque figures writhe and pop in the gloom, either in chilling isolation or frolicking in surreal *mise-en-scène*. As with Bosch, Brueghel and Bacon, to encounter a Burgertian scene is to enter a world in which dreadful chimeras of our nightmares come to life. "We are, as humans, failing all the time," he says. "So, at the end, we have the dirt that comes from scratching, you know? The scratching of your soul. That's what I'm trying to show."

In the past decade, demand for these brilliantly dark works has grown in line with size of his paintings, and the artist is working at a steady clip in his studio complex in Weisensee, in the industrial hinterlands of former East Berlin. It's also the venue for *Ngorongoro*, a sporadic mega-exhibition staged during Berlin's Gallery Weekend and curated by Burgert and like-minded artists John Isaacs, David Nicholson, Christian Achenbach and Andreas Golder who work within his studio complex.

When we meet, the artist is preparing for a multigenerational show with work by Ernst Ludwig Kirchner and Gerhard Richter at the me Collectors Room (until November 3) and a solo show at the ARP Museum in Remagen in February 2020. It's this latter commitment that preoccupies him, as eight canvases sit in varying states around the sunny hangar, amid mangled bits of sculpture, dog-eared art books, ashtrays, beat-up sofas and spattered stereos.

Burgert's complex, disturbing renderings of his fears and observations on religion, society, death, sex and violence contain few spiritual fire escapes. Yet through his prism, we find our stupid souls in all their dumb honesty. "The endless struggle of humans... it's been this way for thousands of years," he laughs. "Artists try to make solutions, a religion of it or something. But I think, the only thing we can do is to live with the ambivalence of grey."

When the Wall fell in 1989, he found himself in the midst of an epochal social, political and ideological uprising. It was in this post-Wall euphoria that he entered the Academy of Fine Arts in West Berlin, where a new, emotional and highly subjective approach placed emphasis on conceptualisation over representational figuration. For Burgert, this created a lifelong distrust of conceptualism: "I was bored hiding behind this avant-garde cool... I wanted to look at the honest struggles we have with our souls, our spirits." ■

STRANGE BEAUTY  
Jonas Burgert  
photographed on  
July 12, 2019, in his  
studio in Berlin

