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Susanne Kühn

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The women in Susanne Kühn's large-scale paintings are alone and isolated despite the crowdedness of their settings, which are frequently borrowed from the history of art. In *Melanie-Melancholy*, 2007, for example, a twenty-first-century woman sits in a courtyard on loan from Fra Filippo Lippi's fifteenth-century *Madonna and Child with Stories of the Life of St. Anne*; but whereas Lippi's Madonna occupies center stage and looks demurely at the viewer, Kühn's subject turns to her right and gazes off into the distance. She is partly obscured by spindly, broken tree limbs and schematic tufts of overgrown grass. While Lippi's painting is a narrative space—figures enact scenes from the life of Mary's mother in the open rooms and alcoves behind her—*Melanie-Melancholy* is full of stuff, rather than people, including furniture, a toy figurine, toy castles, and a garment draped over the table behind the title character. These allusive objects may evoke absent others, but it is clearly not Kühn's intention to provide a legible narrative context for the woman, who remains remote, lost in her own thoughts.

Kühn uses compartmentalized compositions based in the conventions of both Flemish Renaissance painting and Japanese woodblock prints to isolate her female figures. The same woman appears on the extreme right sides of both *Katja's Dream*, 2007, and *Katja-Melancholy*, 2007. In the former, she reposes, though she is not sleeping, on a canopy bed decorated with gothic filigree. In the latter, she sits on a bench in a traditional Japanese building. In both cases, she is framed by structures that are open but that confine her to the margins. In these paintings, as in *Melanie-Melancholy*, interior and exterior spaces overlap in labyrinthine compositions that seem to entrap the women. In *Katja's Dream*, the checkerboard floor, reminiscent of those in Flemish paintings, extends so far that it becomes an exterior walkway. Although it might suggest a Japanese garden, the setting of *Katja-Melancholy* resembles a painting or backdrop more than it does the outdoors. In scale these paintings are expansive, but the worlds they depict are dense and claustrophobic.

Still Life with Books, 2008, is a reworking of Jan van Eyck's *The Arnolfini Marriage*, without the Arnolfinis. In their absence, previously obscured features of the room become visible: The bed, with its pendulous red drapery, dominates, and we also have a clear view of

Susanne Kühn, *Katja-Melancholy*, 2007, diptych, pigment and acrylic on canvas, overall 7' 2 1/2" x 10' 6".



the two chairs, one lower than the other, against the back wall. The seats, cushioned in van Eyck's work, are bare wood here, as if they have been stripped. *The Arnolfini Wedding* is famous for its multiple symbolic objects (e.g., the candelabra), which have prompted endless scholarly interpretation. These objects are all missing from Kühn's version, the sense of absence enhanced by the conspicuous emptiness of the sideboard's compartments. It is as if the Arnolfinis moved out long ago, and subsequent occupants left behind their own emblematic items: toy knights, an oriental rug, two art books, and a distinctly modern painting of a moody male figure partially covered by an open window shutter. Kühn renders the scene in flat planes of color: Van Eyck meets IKEA. She draws successfully on historical tropes of representation to depict a contemporary world that breeds alienation and anomie.

—Philip Auslander