

EXITING THE DREAMLAND

Sophie von Hellermann

By Sofia Hallström



SOPHIE VON HELLERMANN in her Margate, UK, studio, 2023. Photo by Daniel Gurton. Courtesy the artist.

“How long is forever?” asks Alice. “Sometimes, just one second,” replies the White Rabbit. There are dreams lasting an instant in which everything seems frozen for an eternity. Time is elastic in our personal experience of it. Hours fly by like minutes, and minutes are oppressively slow, as if they were centuries.¹



INSIDE BURGER COLLECTION

For her 2021 commission at Turner Contemporary in Margate, England, artist Sophie von Hellermann exhibited a series of paintings that framed a seafront once described by JMW Turner as “the loveliest in all Europe.”² Immediate and active, the exhibition’s title, “Sirens,” evoked sound—from emergency signals to mythological creatures who lure sailors to their death with the sweetness of their songs. Perspectives fluctuated as vast canvases scaled the gallery walls in an expanse of color and space that mirrored the turbulent waters outside. A seascape captured by generations of artists, von Hellermann’s works reframed the rocky waters in her signature Romantic style.

I met von Hellermann in February 2023 in Margate, home to her studio and her family, to discuss her approach to painting, which is studied, intuitive, considered, and often set with deep political undercurrents. Holding both German and British nationality (she was born in Munich and became a British citizen in 2020), much of von Hellermann’s recent work has focused on the tumultuous present and the recent past, including Brexit and the conversations surrounding migration and borders. Like many coastal towns, Margate, a former stronghold of the pro-Brexit United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP), has faced socioeconomic decline—unemployment, underinvestment, and the collapse of traditional working-class industries—all of which contributed to the feeling of neglect and dissatisfaction that resonated with many British people. Overlooking the shores that are protected by sea defences funded by the European Union, we discussed the myriad contradictions and frustrations tied up in the United Kingdom’s political agenda as she shared her

experiences of participating in the anti-Brexit protests that led up to the historic 2016 referendum vote. Paying homage to Margate, her recent Frieze London 2023 presentation “Dreamland” (named after Margate’s iconic funfair) included paintings of spinning carousels, roller coasters, and Ferris wheels set against walls and carpets covered with her distinctive brushstrokes. These paintings—*Merry Go Round*, *Fun Circling*, and *Jess Parade* (all 2023)—capture the essence of Britain’s political and social turbulence and evoke a peculiar kind of thrill: that of escapism, and a carefully crafted dreamland from which there is no need to leave, devoid of real-world consequences. “The here and now is very difficult to be a part of, as the past is weighing on the painting and the future is even more intense,” she admitted. As a bilingual artist, von Hellermann makes paintings that elude translation.

“Sirens,” as well as von Hellermann’s wider practice, attempts to explore the intersection of these themes through surrealist landscapes. At Turner Contemporary, she depicted the nature and fragility of borders, while at the same time delving into the realms of the ordinary and the extraordinary. Frantic brushstrokes and wild exchanges whirl around each painting, framing a painted Dreamland Big Wheel from Margate’s amusement park, floating

1 Carlo Rovelli, *The Order of Time* (London: Allen Lane, 2018), 52.

2 Phil Hubbard, *Borderland: Identity and Belonging at the Edge of England* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2022).

Installation view of “Sirens” at Turner Contemporary, Margate, 2021. Photo by Beth Saunders. Courtesy Turner Contemporary.





Installation view of "Out of Time" at Pilar Corrias, London, 2023. Photo by Mark Blower. Courtesy the artist and Pilar Corrias.

figures, and a sky-rise apartment block that takes center stage. In von Hellermann's images, stark realities are reconciled by motifs from the artist's imagination, interwoven with mythology, history, oral tradition, and the direct contemplation of nature. Even their titles connect language to imagery: *Turn of the Screw* (2022), *Standing at the top of a slippery slope* (2013), *High as a Kite* (2013), and *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (2013). Humorous and seemingly vulnerable, there is an underlying sense of something potentially threatening, a commentary on events yet to happen.

Because of their site-specific complexity, von Hellermann's works are able to open up conversations and reveal new perspectives based on their settings: "When I think about where an exhibition will be, I think about the history of the place, literature I have read connected to the place, films, my own memories, music." For instance, her 2020 solo show at Pilar Corrias gallery in London, titled "A Midsummer Night's Dream," presented a body of work produced in her former studio in the North Downs that drew directly from William Shakespeare's 1596 play of the same name. It also tackled similar realms of experience, such as human nature, societal norms, the disjuncture of reality and imagination, and the interplay between nature and mythology. A previous body of work referencing similar themes was titled after the Ileden forest near Canterbury, where von Hellermann's previous studio was located. In this case, she took inspiration from the whimsical nature of love and wonder during a period of lockdown in the English countryside.

For von Hellermann, painting is informed by her external environment and driven by internal impulses. Recalling her

student days, von Hellermann remembers how the influential German artist Andreas Gursky (who was a professor at the Kunstakademie in Düsseldorf) perceived her paintings as "projections," something she agrees with: "I don't work from sketches or photographs. I have nothing in my hand so to speak, just the idea in my head, [so] it is like my mind projects the image onto the canvas when I paint." As such, her paintings are never pre-planned. Rather, throughout her work, familiar subjects, figures, and everyday visual cues that surround her make their way surreptitiously onto her canvases, compounded by their mise-en-scène. Her art becomes a psychological snapshot that evokes connections with the painting style of the Romantic tradition. Familiar objects are expelled from reality as we know it and placed in otherworldly environments that lack temporal systems, leading to von Hellermann's paintings often inhabiting spaces that are not subject to the limitations of time—neither the past nor the future.

In the studio, von Hellermann prefers to be alone with her paintings. And because she often completes them in one sitting, her materials and fluorescent pigments remain scattered on the floor. "Time is a different thing when I am painting. Because I must act fast, thinking about so many different things instantaneously, I am outside of time." Part imagination and part reality, painting is a meditative and instinctive undertaking, completed almost in an *Augenblick*, a fleeting blink of an eye, a moment reconciled by chance or luck. Even her artistic process is entropic, capturing moving-particle pigments mixed in buckets of water that are loosely gestured over the raw canvas. Preferring



Mid Flight, 2023, acrylic on canvas, 244 × 305 cm. Courtesy the artist and Pilar Corrias.

to work on the floor, von Hellermann lays a foundation of light beiges and earthy green tones before building up the image with blues, yellows, and sharp reds to focus the eye and foreground a subject. She then applies raw pigments to create thick marks and a textural build-up onto the surface of the canvas, a canvas that has been manipulated, its plasticity expanded and altered. The warmer the studio, the smaller her window is in which to work, and the less time she has to move colors around before they dry.

Much like her painting process, von Hellermann's work frequently explores the complex interplay between the temporal dimensions of past, present, and future. It is a way for her to navigate the indefinite boundaries between these stages. An example of this is a 2022 untitled permanent commission at Schloss Freienwalde, a castle in the German countryside that was once home to Walther Rathenau, Germany's only Jewish foreign minister, before he was assassinated in 1922. Drawing inspiration from the long-lost wallpaper and furnishings, von Hellermann used the walls and ceilings of the castle as her canvas, depicting captivating scenes where crystal chandeliers illuminate a flourishing forest in one room, while delicate roses climb towards the ceiling in the next. One of the untitled paintings refers to *Two Women Running on the Beach*

(1922), a painting by Pablo Picasso during his neoclassical period, completed the same year as Rathenau's death. In it, the frenzied rush of two young women along the shoreline is often said to evoke the wild ecstasy of maenads, female devotees of Dionysus who succumbed to states of euphoria brought on by dance and intoxication. The painting delves into the horrors of the past as well as the anxieties that may be lurking around the corner.

Across the street from Turner Contemporary at the Fort Road Hotel, in a stairway leading to a mezzanine-level bar, hangs von Hellermann's site-specific mural from 2022. Floating patterns and twisted plaits envelop visitors as they ascend the stairs. A sense of spatiality has been created here, transforming a confined space into one that radiates luminous depth. It is clear that her paintings unravel the complexities and nuances of the world and, in building new environments, capture its transient nature. In the same stairwell, with captivating blues and reds, von Hellermann created an enchanting vortex that transports us beyond the limits of painted fiction, as if extending itself beyond the edge of the stairs. And even within the walls of the gallery her work explores wide-ranging topics. Her solo exhibition "Out of Time" at Pilar Corrias gallery in 2022 underlaid the concepts of appropriation, extractivism, and humanity's cognitive dissonance toward our contribution to the current situation. In previous works, her

paintings are situated in the here and now, reflecting upon climate catastrophe among other current political and societal problems.

Leaving the hotel, we visited von Hellermann's soon-to-open artist's complex, a former printing studio undergoing renovations to transform it into a space for creating and researching for herself and other artists. Down the road from Margate's shoreline (and fellow artist Tracey Emin's studio), her husband and former gallerist Jonathan Viner, who was at the time overseeing the building works, showed us around. Light funnelled through the Victorian windows as the two discussed its completion date ahead of a number of upcoming exhibitions. Von Hellermann's current studio is in her home, a short drive away. A former convent and home for children with tuberculosis in the 19th century, the space has been filled with her own fantastical paintings, which extend even to the kitchen table and bathtub, sometimes directly onto the walls. Downstairs, it is packed with pots of pigments, buckets, works in progress, and a collection of objects and books, including Slavoj Žižek's *The Year of Dreaming Dangerously* (2012), a story that explores a wave of revolts and political disturbances as the vestiges of a utopian future that remain latent in the present. Much like Žižek's writing, von Hellermann's paintings explore themes of utopianism, political upheaval, and the persistence of ideals and fantasy. In her immersive

installations, von Hellermann is at home in her painted worlds—colorful reimaginings of our everyday realities.

As we discussed ChatGPT and its conflation with imagination and autonomy, Viner cooked a late lunch. Von Hellermann's belief that artificial intelligence will not have the spontaneity or creativity humans do reminded me of an earlier moment, when she showed me a body of work titled *Goddess in the Doorway* from 2005 that was influenced by Albert Einstein. In one painting, *Erratic Erotic* (2005), an image emerged of a lively blonde partygoer, dancing within the confines of a spaceship. In another captivating piece, a scientist takes center stage, engaged in the seemingly contrasting act of playing a musical instrument. From Margate to outer space, nothing escapes the net of this painter's vast imagination as she plays with boundaries, with interiors and exteriors, and concepts of entrapment and freedom.

Her forthcoming body of work draws from the notion of the artist-genius, who is often imagined as solitary and tortured. Yet, painting remains a dynamic process. It requires interaction, dialogue, and the interplay of various elements and influences, and as such, a painting is a collaboration with several people, influences, and resources. A founding member

Ileden, 2023, acrylic on canvas. Photo by Sam Roberts. Courtesy the artist and Pilar Corrias.



of hobbypopMUSEUM, an artist collective from Düsseldorf and London specializing in site-specific installations, von Hellermann explained that “environments” are important for her paintings as a means of actively engaging her audience. Through this process of collaboration, painting becomes a rich tapestry of shared experiences, collective knowledge, and the merging of diverse artistic visions, ultimately transcending the boundaries of individual creativity. Von Hellermann’s paintings are unquestionably inviting, allowing audiences to explore narratives that unfold and evolve with each viewer’s interpretation.

There is little doubt that her paintings are imbued with a sense of urgency. Introspective and outwardly engaging, the images encapsulate a fleeting moment of the artist’s immediate worldly

preoccupations. Von Hellermann’s starting point is to play with the very basics of painting, revitalizing traditional painting codes and turning even the most mundane clichés into powerful forces by emphasizing materiality; bold, sweeping gestures; and approaching subjects from entirely new perspectives—even those that have previously existed in alternative forms. She constantly defies expectations and challenges preconceived notions, breathing new life into topical themes and narratives. Raw, invigorating, and magical, von Hellermann’s works go beyond the canvas’s surface, delving into the depths of human experience, evoking visceral reactions, and, in the process, inviting contemplation.

Sophie von Hellermann was born in Munich, Germany, in 1975 and lives and works in London and Margate, United Kingdom. She received her BFA from Kunstakademie, Düsseldorf, and an MFA from Royal College of Art, London.

Sofia Hallström was born in Linköping, Sweden, and is a writer and artist based in London. She received an MA in fine art (painting and history of art) from Edinburgh College of Art in 2020. Her writing focuses on contemporary art and cultural heritage.



Installation view of an untitled permanent commission at Schloss Freienwalde, Bad Freienwalde, Germany, 2022. Photo by Matthias Kolb. Courtesy the artist and Wentrup, Berlin.