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"Cosima von Bonin's Works Are Dumb. That's the Point," *ArtReview*, J.J. Charlesworth, October 10, 2025

ArtReview

Cosima von Bonin's Works Are Dumb. That's the Point



Cosima von Bonin, *Thrown Out of Drama School*, 2008. Courtesy the artist

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Toilet stalls, plushie toys, whales in Hermès, tri-scooters – it's all just a bit of fun in the gallery. But who gets to be in on the joke?

Plushies, plushies everywhere. Sometimes overstuffed, sometimes saggy. Cosima von Bonin's cartoonish, kapok-filled characters lurk dumpily among the rambling elegance of Raven Row's main gallery and its three floors of wood-panelled rooms. Soft, quizzical defeatism is a mood throughout, full of deflated and deflating humour. A doglike head, floppy brown ears framing the cartoon eyes of its otherwise all-white form, its 'snout' a soft, featureless round, is titled *Shoe* (2007). This foot – or head – sits on the platform of a sort of low metal lookout tower, gazing glumly ahead. Impotence and inertia emanate from behind its furrowed brow. You think you hear yourself asking it, what's the point? *Shoe* doesn't answer. It can't get down from its pedestal (there's a ladder), because it has no legs.

Von Bonin's first-ever exhibition in London is a refreshing reminder – at a moment when a lot of art is preoccupied with what it means, and whether it means the 'right' thing – of a way of making art that plays with failure and the fun of it. The German artist, now in her sixties, found her footing in the postpunkish art scene of 1990s Cologne, falling in with the likes of Martin Kippenberger and Michael Krebber (who she went on to marry). Self-consciously self-deprecating, intensely sociable, cynical yet playful, the 'Cologne scene' has had a long influence on how artists make artworks that mess with their own status – as market commodities, as objects of cultivated appreciation, as things that might criticise and rebuff the conditions that bring them to be there in the first place.

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*The Bonin / Oswald Empire's Nothing # 06 (CvB's Exhausted Tweed Rabbit
& Purple Crab On Pink Table & MvO's Exhausted Tweed), 2010. Photo:
Markus Tretter. Courtesy the artist*

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For von Bonin, those tactics have changed shape over the years. The earliest works are the scrappy *Untitled (Prison Windows)* (1993) series – rough black card collages of an arched portal with white prison bars, shutting us out, or maybe in. (Perhaps foretelling von Bonin’s coming fascination with the animalesque, the checklist credits the materials as including ‘parakeet droppings’.) Across the room, an enamelled red metal sign reads *Privato* (2010), its spare art-deco lettering redolent of Old World licentiousness, or just the toilet-door sign to a fading modernist bar somewhere in late-twentieth-century Europe. It’s an interpretation not dispelled by the double swing-doors of *John James (Loop #2)* (2004), whose pristine white geometry has a joke at Minimalism’s expense, reduced to the flapping doors of pissoir cubicles, whose hinges – if you push through them – perform a climax of ever-quickenings clanks as they flap themselves shut. These are artworks that lavish in their insiderishness and refusal, that snigger and tell you to ‘stay out’.

Who’s being made fun of here? Von Bonin’s aesthetic armoury steadily shifts over the years to the use of consumer materials – particularly textiles. There’s the absurd, slight phallic soft bars and posts of *Fence* (2000) fashioned in pink candystripe; the ‘Saint Laurent rive gauche’ carrier bag, its bold orange and pink squares pinned to a larger square of red-and-white-check cotton (*Yves Saint Laurent*, 1997); and around the necks of the cartoon trio of grey birds and mammals dangling from cords nearby, the epitome of a certain class signalling – Hermès silk scarves. Feminine associations, maybe, but certainly bourgeois, chic, middle-class.

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Hermit Crab in Fake Royère, 2010. Photo: Markus Tretter. Courtesy the artist

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In fact, the peculiar spectres of class-coding and good taste shadow von Bonin's work everywhere, even while she's playing up the stupidity, and even as grown-up stylishness is forever subverted by childishness. In a room upstairs one encounters two tri-scooters parked up in the corners – not childsize, but of the height and high-end manufacture required by well-off manbabies (*Who's Who* 1, 2014). A sort of midcentury-modernist chic turns up in the various bits of school furniture that appear as part of sculptures – the Arne Jacobsen desk and chair that supports a dumpy giant baby-chick made of velour, who appears to have puked ketchup onto its tubby belly (*The Bonin/Oswald Empire's Nothing #01 [CvB's Vomiting Chick]*, 2010). At Raven Row the chick is staring dumbly across a room mostly occupied by a huge, shiny white and red rocket, like an upscaled toy missile, while a soundtrack of ambient dance music of the 'poolside chillout'-playlist persuasion smoothes the whole scene into one of Prozacked complacency.

Taste, seriousness, class arrogance, failure, bad taste, humility – all these are poised in awkward, comic balance. And as the sagging animals flop and slump, too tired to pick themselves up (one tweed rabbit is so fatigued it can't help but crush its little crab companion under its slumping paw) you get the sense that von Bonin's provocations cut several ways: across the art museum's sense of decorum, and across the self-regard of collectors who might think they're insiders to the joke von Bonin is telling about art. But it might be that the joke she's telling is really addressed at us, about our own troubles with all the problems we have with what we value – about taste, pleasure, fashion and the word 'art', and why it's still there.

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