

Estelle Hoy, "Cosima Von Bonin's soft toys storm the Petit Palais," *Art Basel*, October 6, 2026.

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Estelle Hoy dissects the German maverick's plush menagerie – a feisty manifesto for fashion, freedom, and fun

By Estelle Hoy | Oct 6, 2026 | 5 min read

St. Bernards have a classic image: altruistic hounds rescuing unprepared hikers in Alpine snow, eating paltry rations of dehydrated, refried black beans. Gallant, the dog enters, thick paw pads confident in ice and sleet, a wooden barrel of water tied around its neck for the weary, hypothermic traveler. An outsize mountain dog also stars in *Belle and Sebastian*, the hit anime cartoon adaptation of Cécile Aubry's novel about a boy who meets a misunderstood beast with a reputation for violence that was never fact-checked. Sebastian takes the dog under his wing and christens her 'Belle.' Memorable line by Sebastian: 'You are so beautiful, I'll call you Belle, and you'll be my friend.' It's all very poetic, *yadda yadda*, yet Belle's rap sheet is not the only misrepresentation in the mix. Truth is, the classic image of these noble pedigrees' kegs containing water is a myth: In actuality, it's a sharp, body-warming brandy or sauvignon blanc. (Or is it the other way around? In any case, wine is always an emergency. Just ask Jesus at that dreary wedding.) I'm going somewhere gorgeous with this, you'll see.

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Cosima von Bonin's *Beaux* for Loewe. Show Space Reveal and Art Pieces by Clip by Titre Provisoire / @titreprovisoire. Commissioned by Jack McCollough and Lazaro Hernandez for the Loewe Fall Winter 2026 show.

Entering familiar terrain with her own St. Bernard is Kenyan-born German artist Cosima von Bonin, the art world's Sebastian, declaring a fun yet rebellious exhibition 'Dollys & Beaux' at the Petit Palais for Art Basel Paris's public program. *Beaux* in French means beautiful, as does *Belle*, but the former is plural, which is important. Von Bonin's beautiful cartoonish creatures – an assembly of soft-stuffed leather, velvet, and mohair sculptures – first skulked into public view earlier this year for Loewe's Fall/Winter 2026 collection's show, bringing the worlds of contemporary art and fashion into close dialogue. Von Bonin's signature oversized textile animals occupied the runway space, and her playful imagery filtered directly into garments and accessories: Some of the artist's floral motifs peeked from inner linings; her animal motifs cropped up as charms or jewels; and she even collaborated on a version of the fashion house's iconic 'Amazona 180' bag. *Occupied* is not quite the right word; more precisely, *involved*.

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Detail, Cosima von Bonin's scallops. Show Space Reveal and Art Pieces by Photographer: Piotr Niepsuj / @piotrneipsuj.
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Cosima von Bonin, Beau 20-23 (black velvet blue mohair scallops version), 2026. Show Space Reveal and Art Pieces by Photographer: Piotr Niepsuj / @piotrniepsuj. Commissioned by Jack McCollough and Lazaro Hernandez for the Loewe Fall Winter 2026 show.

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The Beau 9 (2026), a princely foam-and-polyfill midnight-blue velvet St. Bernard with a plush wooden barrel around its neck, will smuggle cheap, nasty wine into the Petit Palais’s prestigious grandeur. Von Bonin takes an image already burdened with the seriousness of rescue or heroic devotion and pours it down the drain in the Palais, in conviviality and absurdity, which is very much her aesthetic custom.. The barrel becomes a tipsy instrument of hierarchical conversion; something that appears monumental and noble is made ridiculous, uncouth, loafing, performing a spurning of seriousness achieved not by opposing institutions head-on but by introducing humor and intoxication into its Symbolic Order.

As always, she’s totally inappropriate. *Tsk-tsk*.



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The attractive creatures will create a mischievous, interactive mise-en-scène: a hermit crab, sea scallops with earnest, popping eyes, a dog, an octopus, and a handsome whale. *The Beau 4* (2026) is a black-and-white mohair and leather killer whale in some sort of upward-dog yoga posture, rising dramatically to get in on dismantling hierarchies, which is what von Bonin is generally all about. One way she’s demonstrated this throughout her 40-odd-year career is her casual disinterest in controlling the viewer’s interpretation of her work. Why have one artistic reading when you can have five, seven, *twelve*! Greedy Cosima can’t help herself, gorging on the innards of visual analyses with a fully loaded humor experience that touches on what she’s assuredly invested in: elevating interpretive freedom.

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She makes *our* reading possible without lording over us like an artist-vulture tapping her foot: a room of one's own to shape our understanding of an artwork, no matter how lowly, lazy, sloth-like, or misguided. A hands-off approach that leaves room for an audience, even curious fashion folk, to finally be involved in the artistic exchange, developing every crass and magnificent assumption, and it's as refreshing as that woody chardonnay. No one telling us what to think about their work, how fast to respond. It's very unproductive. She'll rarely shed exacting light on her intentions: She even declined to provide her own quotes for this essay, but perhaps I'm taking things *too literally* – her Germanness might be contagious. In a nutshell (or barrel): Von Bonin is rescuing the art world from itself, turning water into wine. And by God, we need it.

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This is all very characteristic of her, mind you. The many oversized stuffed animals von Bonin has made act as hilarious antiheroes, exhausted, useless, unproductive in a culture where every single minute must count, count, count. *Schnell!!!* A historical example is her *Purple Sloth Rabbit* (2010), a colossal stuffed animal lying prostrate, whose soles have 'SLOTH' hand-embroidered in capitals, central to her 'Lazy Susan Series' exhibitions (2010–2012). In a fableistic sloth-and-the-hare-race rescript, von Bonin turns laziness into a countervalue, tripping up the speed and productivity that sustain the surefootedness of neoliberalism. Collapsed on its back listening to Dolly Parton after his pathetic 9-to-5, the Sloth-Hare asks ChatGPT: '*wot if productivity, ambition, and usefulness ain't inherently virtuous? It's enuf to drive you crazy if you let it!*'

A recurring concern for von Bonin (and Dolly) is what happens when you bypass the roles society asks you to 'stage.' If one comes out of their shell long enough to perform anything at all...which brings us to *The Beau 12* (2026): a silky blue velvet hermit crab sculpture living in his shell by happy choice, hiding from life's acceleration, violence, ambitious demands, and enduring disappointments. Setting oneself apart from society's ills is a survival strategy, yet here von Bonin's crab has literally emerged from its shell, conspicuously clawing its way (see what I did there) into the Petit Palais's spectacle.

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Cosima von Bonin, The Beau 4 (black mohair white leather killer whale version), 2026. Commissioned by Jack McCollough and Lazaro Hernandez for the Loewe Fall Winter 2026 show. Show Space Reveal and Art Pieces by Photographer: Piotr Niepsuj / @piotrniepsuj.

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From the Lazy Susan Series, 2010-2012. Courtesy of the artist and Kunsthau Bregenz. Photo: Markus Tretter.



From the Lazy Susan Series, 2010-2012. Courtesy of the artist and Witte de With, Rotterdam. Photo: Studio Goedewaagen.

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Cosima von Bonin, The Beau 12 (blue velvet hermit crab version), 2026. Commissioned by Jack McCollough and Lazaro Hernandez for the Loewe Fall Winter 2026 show. Show Space Reveal and Art Pieces by Photographer: Piotr Niepsuj / @piotrnepsuj.

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In real life, von Bonin eschews press interviews and art openings, *even her own*, deliberately choosing to draw back from the spotlight, perhaps in favor of making art that troubles the world in just the right way. The crab’s emergence intimates that withdrawal and engagement needn’t be antithetical, but can simply be different game plans for negotiating a very difficult world. If retreat can be a form of resistance, so too can visibility.

What *has* been visible is von Bonin’s significant contribution to Cologne’s vibrant art scene in the late 1980s and 1990s, forming connections with artists, musicians, and cultural figures including Martin Kippenberger and indie-rocker Dirk von Lowtzow. This interdisciplinary cauldron influenced her artistic practice, which evolved around conceptual art, music, and a critical resistance to art-world conventions. The creative community became a beautiful fellowship in which friendships, exquisite party life, and the avant-garde were dexterously intertwined. Since her Cologne days, international recognition has scampered after her through exhibitions including ‘Roger and Out’ at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles (2007), documenta 12 (2007), ‘The Fatigue Empire’ at Kunsthaus Bregenz (2010), and the 2022 Venice Biennale.



Cosima von Bonin, Dolly 1 (nappa octopus version), 2026. Photo: Oskar Lee / oskar_lee_archive. Courtesy of Gaga, Mexico City; Galerie Neu, Berlin; Petzel, New York, NY.

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Cosima von Bonin, Dolly 3 (nappa bulldog & lobster version), 2026. Photo: Oskar Lee / oskar_lee_archive. Courtesy of Gaga, Mexico City; Galerie Neu, Berlin; Petzel, New York, NY.

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The Petit Palais presentation will be compelling precisely because here the artist reminds us that cultural value is produced through institutions and forms of *soi-disant* cultural authority, and then collapses the artificial pecking order between them in cavalier scope and a whooping click of the heels (she's a party girl after all). And maybe this is where her work – Pop installations, fabric sculptures, readymades – is most quietly radical: She scoffs at the notion that art must be serious to be significant. Von Bonin's series of velvet sea scallops is particularly nudging here because of its proximity to *consumption*, literally speaking. Enlarged googly-eyed plushies rendered in cushy black and blue textile make the scallop series something to contemplate, not instantly consume, probably a tongue-in-cheek reference to fashion consumption, since the series was originally made for the runway. Von Bonin turns an object of appetite into an object of attention, an almost absurdly simple gesture.

She scoffs at the notion that art must be serious to be significant.

'Dollys & Beaux' christens the multitude of ways we make beauty plural, again and again, knowing the ugliness and misattributions in the world, yet making friends with them. It's an invitation to do so lethargically, in kinship and thinly veiled chortles. Memorable line by Cosima von Bonin: *'You are so beautiful, I'll call you "The Beaux," and you'll be my friend.'*

<https://www.artbasel.com/stories/art-basel-paris-public-program-cosima-von-bonin-petit-paris-2026>

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