

Press Release

Soft Shell. Natacha Donzé, Ray Hegelbach, Ivan Mitrovic, Anna Shirin Schneider, Nora Steiner

Exhibition title: Soft Shell

Artists: Natacha Donzé, Ray Hegelbach, Ivan Mitrovic, Anna Shirin Schneider, Nora Steiner

Curated by Eva-Maria Knüsel

Venue: Kunsthaus Langenthal, CH

Date: 27 August – 15 November 2020

Photography: CE

The group exhibition includes works by five artists who have chosen painting as their preferred medium of expression. The works by Natacha Donzé, Ray Hegelbach, Ivan Mitrovic, Anna Shirin Schneider and Nora Steiner are characterized by the engagement with everyday impressions and symbols, specifically the social power differentials and the digital and pop-cultural imagery they inherently express and reproduce. They experiment with and freshly interpret traditional conventions of visual representation, gestural habits, and viewing regimes within the context of painting. The title of the exhibition, "Soft Shell", makes reference to the contradictory materiality of painting as well as the clash of assertiveness and vulnerability and playfulness and seriousness in the artists' respective practices.



Credits: Soft Shell, Group Show, 2020, Exhibition views Kunsthaus Langenthal, Photos: CE, Courtesy of the Artists.

Exhibition text

Soft Shell

Supple, light, and breathable, yet isolating and sturdy – so-called *Soft Shell* outdoor clothing promises both comfort and protection from the elements.

As for people, a hard outside can hide an inner softness. *Soft Shell* inverts this model by seemingly transforming vulnerability into an armor. But *Shell* of course also refers to the objects one finds on beaches and the shore. You might remember that tongue-twister from your childhood: “She sells seashells on the seashore.” One can extend this thought from the strange, soft marine creatures inhabiting these shells to the membrane enveloping the novel virus whose emergence and pandemic spread deeply impacted the preparations for this exhibition:

First, it was postponed, the circumstances remaining uncertain for a considerable length of time. We retreated into the confines of your homes. We met on the roof of the workshop in order to observe the recommended rules of physical distancing and talked about the current situation, which seemed more pressing than our work. We sat opposite each other in the same virtual space, geographically removed from one another, wearing comfortable workout clothes, sporting grown-out Corona hair. We let the camera pan through the workshop in an attempt to get a sense of the paintings of the people we were talking to in spite of the low image quality.

The *Soft Shell* became the symbol of the state of exception: we grew more fragile, slow, and porous. The softening of the private sphere, the increased awareness of the precarious working and living conditions of many artists, the confrontation with the vulnerability of society as well as the human body all resonate in the works that were newly conceived for the exhibition.

Beyond this, *Soft Shell* also describes the porous quality of curatorial work: to decide on a subjective selection while remaining confident that the pieces will work as an ensemble; to offer a framework while making sure that it remains flexible.

Lastly, *Soft Shell* stands for the painterly attitudes and artistic strategies one encounters in the exhibition: to assess the material by palpation – until it breaks and tears; to scratch the surface a little harder, curious to find out what is hiding underneath; to allow contradictions and the poetic qualities they engender; to shake up existing ways of looking at the world until they splinter and make room for new work; to forget one’s virtuosity and instead to recognize the earnestness of one’s own searching; to wear softness and vulnerability on one’s sleeves without fear of being exposed.

Eva-Maria Knüsel, August 2020