



Marius Steiger – Hermitage

September 6 – November 9 2025

Exhibition text by Kiki Seiler-Michalitsi, curator of the exhibition

Kunst Raum Riehen presents the first institutional solo exhibition by emerging Swiss artist Marius Steiger (born 1999 in Bern; lives in Bern and London). In his practice, Steiger explores painting and its history through contrasts such as authenticity and artificiality, figuration and abstraction, illusion and simulation, and the relationship between humans and modern technologies. Rather than drawing from nature or real objects, he works with his own digitally generated 3D renderings. From these he creates pictorial works in the tradition of trompe-l'œil: shaped canvases with a digital aesthetic that imitate individual motifs or situations. Their flawless surfaces and fragmentation both seduce and betray their artificiality — pointing to their origin in the virtual world.

The exhibition *Hermitage* reflects on continuity and collective cultural memory — on permanence, the transmission of iconic forms and motifs, and the persistence of seeing and remembering. On view are paintings with symbolic subjects such as architectural structures, vehicles, classical artifacts, and abstract celestial bodies. They shift between image and object, reality and rendering, combining real narratives with fiction. This contradiction becomes especially clear in the attempt to translate the seemingly limitless possibilities of digital space into material form.

Steiger also works with installation and immersive spatial experiences. In *Hermitage*, the paintings follow the architecture of the three floors, functioning as both visual and conceptual framework elements. Individually and in combination, they form a holistic, contemporary still life. In doing so, they reinterpret the vanitas tradition — not through classic symbols of transience, but through a rigid, artificial stillness that recalls digital imagery and blurs the line between reality and virtuality. The motifs act not only as objects but also as reflective surfaces for the medium of painting itself. They demonstrate how painting can preserve and transform the fleeting, carrying it into new contexts — as a resistance to time. Familiar pictorial icons appear as carriers of collective memory and condensed meaning.

Room 1 (Small hall)

The work *Van* (2024), depicts a small delivery van reduced to its essential iconographic features, a setting reminiscent of a showroom emerges in the small hall. The van — long since a symbol of consumer society in the age of online shopping — is stripped of its functional purpose and suspended in a state of permanent immobility.

As the first work in Steiger's Car Series *Van* inaugurates a group of formally concise car paintings that critically examine the symbolic charge of technical objects and the cultural values attached to them. Iconic in its glorious solitude, detached and exaggerated, *Van* oscillates between image and artifact. It reflects contemporary consumer practices while transforming into an allegory of the boundless availability of goods.

Room 4 (Garden hall)

More than a hundred circular canvases of varying sizes and colors (*Spheres Space*, 2025) cover the walls from floor to ceiling. They evoke abstract, luminous celestial bodies, soap bubbles, spheres, or scattered pearls, while remaining open carriers of meaning. Bright highlights on each canvas simulate three dimensionality — an effect disrupted by the visibly unpainted edges of the supports. This tension reinforces their physical presence while suggesting movement.

With their apparent materiality, the *Spheres* expand into the entire room, transforming it into a site of projection and reflection on perception and meaning.

Room 5 (Parterre)

Two bust-shaped paintings (*Figure*, 2025) depict Hermes, the messenger of the gods, based on a well-known late classical work by Praxiteles. Positioned opposite each other in slightly varied poses, they seem absorbed in silent contemplation or engaged in an inner dialogue.

The painted busts reference a classical form of commemorative culture: the honoring and immortalising of rulers and significant figures. Once an expression of power and legacy, the bust today appears everywhere — from stock photography to video games and AI-generated images. Reproduced endlessly and increasingly detached from its original context, it has become a decorative motif, circulating as art prints and wall ornaments.

In dialogue with the painted wooden beams (*Wood (Ten Planks)*, 2025) and the monumental painting *Door (Consoling Love)*(2025), the Hermes busts take on the quality of fragments from a lost architectural and cultural order; a world in which images still carried unquestioned authority. Together, the works invite reflection on shifting notions of representation, authority, and legacy in an increasingly digital world. The antique busts also recall Steiger's first work exhibited at Kunst Raum Riehen in 2022/23.

Ten canvases with striking, painterly surfaces reminiscent of wooden planks (*Wood (Ten Planks)*, 2025) almost block the usual free passage through the room and partially obscure the works behind them. This setting provokes curiosity, creating a situation in which paintings can only be viewed through others.

The “wooden planks” cut through the open space like architectural partitions, redefining it and evoking associations with limitation, labor, and control. Their deliberate placement not only guides physical movement but also demands heightened awareness, making the challenge of perception itself part of the spatial design. The gaze is directed outward, yet the outside, framed by this constructed interior, appears as part of a stage-like backdrop.

After passing through the “wooden planks installation,” visitors encounter a monumental painting of an open Rococco ceremonial door — *Door (Consoling Love)* (2025). Freely positioned in a light shaft that connects several floors, the work, over four meters tall, reaches the floor above and thus also becomes part of the installation there and offering shifting perspectives and spatial contexts.

Door (Consoling Love) envisions the entrance to a ballroom: an iconic threshold evoking grandeur and elegance without referring to a specific site. The portal is both image and object, a threshold between inside and outside. Embedded within it is a round painting (tondo) that cites François Boucher’s Rococo masterpiece *Consoling Love* (1751), renowned for its graceful forms and pastel-like colours. Depicting Venus surrounded by cherubs and doves, the inset painting introduces softness, myth, and ornamental richness—standing in deliberate contrast to the architectural austerity of the door.

In dialogue with the painted busts of Hermes on the wooden planks, *Door (Consoling Love)* transcends space and time, staging history as image and illusion. Venus represents love and beauty, Hermes transition and communication. Together, they deepen the motif of the door as a threshold — between visible and hidden, memory and desire.

Room 6 (First floor)

Marius Steiger’s *Wall (Hermitage)* (2025) is composed of hundreds of individually stretched and painted, brick-like canvases assembled into a monumental structure. It evokes an architectural fragment, at once exterior wall, ruin, and stage set, while also functioning as a large-scale painting. The result is a surface that seems solid yet simulated, hovering between image and object.

Each element appears minimal and abstract, but together they form an overall image that oscillates between repetition and realism. The work draws on both the aesthetics of Minimalism and the visual language of construction, treating painting as a game of accumulation and illusion. The subtitle *Hermitage* refers to the Ermitage in Arlesheim, the historic landscape garden where the artist’s father grew up.

The abstractly staged *Bookcase* (2024) presents a familiar piece of furniture whose surfaces simulate polished wood. The hyperrealistic rendering of the wood grain contrasts with its abstract, monochrome contents: rows of books and folders made from individually shaped canvases, reduced to anonymous forms and painted in

shades of gray. Their empty, unlabeled spines reveal nothing about what they might contain.

The bookcase conjures spatial concepts and systems of order — archiving, categorization, bureaucracy — while at the same time appearing vacant and artificial. Oscillating between function and decoration, *Bookcase* reflects on the fragility of such structures and reimagines furniture not only as functional design, but as a site where the personal and the systematic coexist, quietly, openly, and without hierarchy.

Room 7 (Second floor)

Like the *Bookcase* in Room 6, *Cabinet* (2024), shown on the top floor, depicts a familiar, yet larger piece of furniture whose wooden surfaces are rendered with hyperrealistic precision in deliberately painterly language. As in *Bookcase*, these contrast with abstractly painted books on the shelves, which gesture toward stylistic periods, spatial concepts, and systems of order without naming them directly. On the left and right sides of the cabinet, bright, mirror-like surfaces seem to extend the static furniture into its surroundings. Yet these mirrors do not reflect. Instead, they become symbolic metaphors for painting itself, deceptive surfaces that recall both the simulacrum and the vanitas tradition.

Two realistically painted apples placed among the books recall Cézanne's iconic still lifes, where the apple became a symbol of artistic experimentation and upheaval. For Cézanne, the motif offered a means to explore form, color, and structure — famously inspiring his claim that he wanted “to astonish Paris with an apple.” In this lineage, *Cabinet* can be read as a contemporary still life: an arrangement of everyday objects that questions illusion, perception, and the very nature of painting.

As part of the exhibition, all windows are covered with red foil. The daylight entering the rooms is transformed into a cinematic glow that floods the space with a strange, theatrical atmosphere, evoking associations of desire, ecstasy, and transcendence. Through this red filter, the outside world itself becomes part of the installation—distorted, alienated, and symbolically charged.

The foil functions as a living vanitas motif. Rather than pointing to transience, it reveals that every image is already tinted by history, context, and cultural heritage. This simple gesture transforms the exhibition space, just as painting alters the visible and creates illusion out of reality. The exhibition as a whole — an artificially constructed world where history, myth, and the present converge — thus becomes a retreat of painted illusions: a hermitage.

Events:

Thursday, September 18, 2025, 2 – 5 pm

'Real Objects and Digital Worlds – Your 3D-Adventure' – Workshop for youth aged 12 to 16 with Tanja Weidmann, art education. Cost: CHF 7. Registration by September 10, 2025: kunstraum@riehen.ch

Wednesday, September 24, 2025, 6 pm

Exhibition tour with Olga Osadtschy, artistic director of the Fondation Fernet-Branca, and Kiki Seiler-Michalitsi

Wednesday, October 29, 2025, 6 pm

Artist talk with Marius Steiger, moderated by Kiki Seiler-Michalitsi

The exhibition is supported by:

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C. und A. Kupper-Stiftung

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Opening hours during the exhibition:

Wed – Fri: 1 pm – 6 pm

Sat/Sun: 11 am – 6 pm