

**DAMIEN
&
THE LOVE GURU**

Mathias Toubro
heaven

16 November 2024 – 17 January 2025

Several beautiful, quite summery days went by, which I devoted to the course of my new life.¹

Mathias Toubro's *heaven* offers fractions of a story set in what seems to be the alps. The works take shape in a range of paintings and a video installation. Reading Olga Tokarczuk's *Empusium* on his suggestion, I begin to see the inspiration Mathias might have drawn from the novel (amongst other sources he mentioned). Strolling through a nearby park, I start to formulate, in Tokarczuk's tone, a story to the paintings Mathias has made, as a backdrop. Fiction as a tool to understanding. *Empusium*, set in 1913 and published in 2022, explores themes of illness, wellness, and transformation. In the spa town of Göbersdorf in Lower Silesia, the protagonist Mieczysław Wojnicz arrives seeking reprieve from tuberculosis. The story delves into the ambiguous terrain of healing practices in early 20th-century Europe, where medical science, alternative therapies, and occult practices converge. The idea of the spa – or mountain retreat – becomes both a place of refuge and a metaphor for the fragmented nature of modern self-care practices and wellness. The patients in Göbersdorf confront not just their physical ailments but also deeper psychological and existential disquiet, undergoing treatments and faced with philosophies that blend science with spirituality.

The term wellness was popularised in the late 1950s by Dr Halbert L. Dunn, the so-called father of the movement. Since then, the difference between health and wellbeing and wellness has been distinctly drawn: while Dunn defines good health as an absence of illness, wellness is an “active, ongoing pursuit” that focuses on the improvement of the self as defined by the self. Today, wellness is often seen as a journey of self-transformation—a holistic process that goes beyond curing diseases to achieving balance, personal growth, and mental clarity. But is wellness an individual quest, or is it something more complex, intertwined with one's environment, history, and social context? The wellness industry markets health as a commodity, promoting the idea that with enough green juice, steam baths, and well-timed savasanas, one can control their health—obscuring larger societal influences.

In the overwhelming soup of wellness possibilities offered, one thought becomes prevalent—the idea that meaningful change begins with the individual, that society only improves if each person transforms their own lifestyle. Self reform equals social reform; deeply anchored in the neoliberal belief that individuals are accountable for and can steer their own well-being. I often question my own perception and the inability to differentiate authentic wellness and its illusion.

Back in the gallery, the works are grouped toward two different perspectives: The paintings capture momentary glimpses, individual observations—some inviting a sequence of actions, like the loosely set tables with snacks or feet still to be massaged. We wander through the eyes of an unknown ensemble of characters. In contrast to this, the video and the chaise longues create a stage for the fiction of an external viewpoint. Here, we are not peering through someone's subjective lens but are invited to recline, relaxing as we watch scenes of pyramidal mountains, the sun rising, setting, snow drifting, floating by.

Landscape... is a great... mystery... because in fact... it takes shape... in the eyes... of the beholder, he struggled to say. He added that it was a sort of projection of the spectator's inner state, and that we should wonder whether what we are seeing might look entirely different in reality.²

I don't think Mathias implies an underlying critique of health culture or the quest of seeking health in these works. Much rather, they are fragmented explorations of the phenomenon, cut into observations, flickering images, instants—a collection of notes towards a larger, unresolved narrative. The works are taking note, while resisting their own positioning. As characters in this scene, we're drawn into an open-ended structure, where potential narratives around self-improvement emerge, casting us both as viewers and unwitting participants in the spectacle of self-care.

And now we shall leave them here, debating around a table covered with an ominously patterned cloth, we shall leave them, to vacate the house via the chimney or the chinks between the slate roof tiles—and then gaze from afar, from above. It has started to rain, droplets are flowing down the roof and forming transparent, shining lace before dripping onto the ground, teasing it, making it itch, carving little hollows, then gathering hesitantly into little rivulets to seek a course among the stones, under a clump of grass, beside a root, and finally down the path trodden by patient animals. But we shall return.³

— Julia Kunzi