

**Finn Carstens**  
**Your weapon is absolute**

*Text by Nicola E. Petek*

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I enter the backyard in Berlin-Wedding where Finn Carsten's studio is located in an old coach house. It is a late on a March evening, spring is already hinting through the buds on the willow next to the two-storey building but it is still cold. Bright light falls through the invitingly open door onto the paving stones. I recognise the same bricks in some of the oil paintings as I enter the studio. Furthermore, I find sceneries full of humour yet gloomy, sparsely populated worlds on the brink of apocalypse, characters, single or in company, seeming to falter with loneliness.

Fires, withered vegetation, cyclists in fictitious landscapes contrasting against interiors with plunge pools and spas. The occurrences, which always seem sealed off from the outside world, stand not only for themselves, but for the greater consciousness of humankind. Without explicitly taking up moral-philosophical questions, Carstens deals with the conflict between nature and culture, wilderness and civilisation, individual and society. Climate change and the associated droughts and wildfires, for example, are thematized and visualized. The world and everything in it is fragile and threatened. A life-saving parachute can only take us up to a certain point before itself bursts into flames.

In the use of materials, Carstens contrasts opaque areas of paint with the loosely broken lines of oil sticks. A matte body dangles upside down in front of glossy ceramic tiles in *Hanging Tree* (2023). The figure seems strangely asymmetrical; although its back is turned to the viewer, it looks right at us thanks to the unnaturally overstretched neck. The buttocks are exposed, the eyes are wide open and full of fear, the face's features reminiscent of the two Medusa figures in the late antique Cisterna Basilica in Istanbul (Turkish: Yerebatan Sarnıcı). The painter, himself with Turkish roots, repeatedly refers in conversation to the influence of the culture and history on himself, on his view of the world. The painting *Untitled* (2022) featuring a burning parachute,

for example, was created as a reaction to the forest fires near Bodrum in late summer 2021.

Most artists are particularly sensitive to the world that surrounds them, but when it comes to processing these impressions and experiences in the studio, they are left to their own devices. Like a marooned person on a desert island, Carstens tries to protect himself - isolated in his studio - from becoming 'too lonely'. The solitude can sometimes be unbearable, the constant interaction with his own thoughts too draining. In Türkiye there is the phrase: '*Denize düşen yılanı sarılır*' which translates to '*The one who has fallen into the sea clings (even) to a snake*'. The snake as a recurring motif is found several times in Carstens' work. When I look at the creatures, they remind me less of the Christian emblem as a harbinger of misfortune, but rather of an interpretation of *Şahmara*, a mystical figure known mostly in Anatolia, Iran, Iraq, and Kurdistan. She is considered the goddess of wisdom and protector of secrets, to whom healing abilities are attributed.<sup>1</sup> In *Hanging Tree*, the snake is found in a balustrade in the background of the canvas, with the shapes creating a connection to the tree from whose branch the figure hangs at the knees. In the other large-format painting, *Duck duck duck* (2023), the serpent appears in the pattern of the coat the person is wearing. The garment hides - or protects? - the figure's body from our gaze.

In ancient Greek theater, there were conflicts that could not always be resolved by human action. Their resolution or decision came '*from above*' through the surprising intervention of a deity who gave the final turn to the events. Artists often rely on the intervention of the higher, the '*Deus Ex Machina*'.<sup>2</sup> On being able to surrender to the anarchic movement of the hand or the will of the brush, which offers solutions within the painting process that cannot be achieved intellectually. Carstens playfully finds ways to overcome these hurdles while embracing humor. What counts to him is the impact of the image rather than the anatomical accuracy of the figures and animals depicted. The paintings are reminiscent of theatre stages, constructed spaces, static scenery through which his protagonists move, act, suffer.

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<sup>1</sup> Ahmed, Mohammed M. A. (2008). *A Fire in My Heart: Kurdish Tales*. World folklore series. Diane Edgecomb, Mohammed M. A. Ahmed, Çeto Özel. Libraries Unlimited. pp. 107–108.

<sup>2</sup> Chondros, Thomas G.; Milidonis, Kypros; Vitzilaios, George; Vaitis, John (September 2013). "Deus-Ex-Machina reconstruction in the Athens theater of Dionysus". *Mechanism and Machine Theory*. 67: 172–191.

Through his art, Carstens takes the liberty of combining the prosaic with the mystical. He allows everyday experiences to have the same effect on his pictorial worlds as special or traumatic events. The heavy is balanced with the light, melancholy is juxtaposed with bliss. As I leave the studio and stumble over the cobblestones in the courtyard, I think about the parallelism between the images and reality. For Carstens' canvases cause my thoughts to stumble as well, throwing me off balance for a moment before I quietly chuckle, regain my composure and joyfully lose myself in perceiving and processing their complexity.