

Of Windows and Doorways

About Suzan Noesen's work

A woman sits at a table with an oversized funnel on her head; hands open a door, paint a picture, sweep the floor; a pedestrian navigates an invisible line through the traffic. Whether they take the shape of performances, videos, photographs or paintings, Suzan Noesen's works often revolve around sequences of actions and patterns of movement. The body and its gestures are used to create thoughtful, self-contained images that speak with great sensitivity about everyday life, explore social coexistence and hierarchies, or contrast past and future.

In her two-channel projection *Four Hands* (2019), Noesen stages a silent dialogue between the hands of two women of different generations. We don't know who nor where these women are, but many of their movements are familiar. We see how the "young hand" easily operates the clutch of a car whereas the elder woman's wrinkled hand is shaking as she is spreading jam on a slice of toast. Without sentimentality, Noesen creates a space to reflect on human existence and, more specifically, being a woman. Far from the big events in life, she speaks of life itself – here, one life approaching the end of its journey, the other still in the middle of it. Through careful editing and a deliberate nod to mainstream cinema aesthetics, Noesen creates a tension and depth with which she manages to captivate viewers.

Noesen's works emphasise moments that anticipate and suggest a before and an after, as well as alternating between reality and fiction. To capture this in-between is always a challenge, one that requires a precise mix of planning and spontaneity – a technique Noesen has refined throughout her career. Even if her work of recent years has increasingly departed from classical performance, these works highlight the fact that a performative approach, and hence finding the right balance between concept and improvisation, still characterises her practice.

In the photograph *The Servant* (2018) we see a woman – the artist herself – in her studio. She holds a bowl of paint, her eyes turned towards the floor, looking concentrated and introverted. As though it were a film in pause mode, we expect the kneeling woman to come to life any second and start moving. Noesen's works are most exciting in those instances where fiction, staging and composition combine to create the impression of a snapshot and merge with reality. Here, the artist encourages us to enter a fascinating space of speculation by creating an image that tells a story whose beginning and end remain unclear. The work was inspired by Jan Vermeer's *Milkmaid* (1657/58), in which the painter's servant is seen pouring milk into a bowl. In her re-enactment, Noesen contrasts the gesture of the milkmaid with her own action as an artist, questioning the role of women and social class in the original painting. In her own take on the subject, the gesture of pouring becomes a step in fulfilling one's own creative potential.

Another fascinating aspect of Noesen's practice is the purposeful interweaving of individual works. Although autonomous, her paintings and drawings often reappear in photographs or videos, and the videos in turn help frame the mood of her performances. In combinations brimming with associations, the artist arranges and juxtaposes her works like the individual components of a stage set, playing with their respective functions according to the narrative she wants to emphasise.

In her current paintings, Noesen examines the properties and possibilities of overlapping and transparency. Thanks to the experimental use of silk or nylon as canvasses, they automatically become part of the physical space in which they are viewed and exhibited. Depending on who stands or what lies behind them, the work is expanded by way of context and association. Like pieces of clothing or curtains, these paintings embrace the room in which they are shown.

Although Noesen's figurative paintings consistently address traditional pictorial concerns – support material, paint, binding medium – they often start from a conceptual impetus. The series of works *De Be St (Squatting Kit)* (2018), for instance, refers to a past definition by the Dutch police according to which an occupied house was considered inhabited when possession of a chair, bed and table could be established. Based on this interpretation, Noesen developed a large-scale painting that not only turns the exhibition venue into a poetic interpretation of residence, but more importantly still, breaks up the exhibition space – a space often characterised by elitist hierarchies – and makes it conceptually 'livable' and therefore accessible. The starting point of this physical and mental appropriation lies in Noesen's critical questioning of the accessibility of supposedly public spaces.

Like doors or windows, Noesen's multi-layered works open up different spaces and open the gaze onto situations in which visibility and invisibility, action and temporality, social organisation and functionality, communication and awareness are central issues.

Come in.

Nora Mayr

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