Sarah Bogner
PICTURE ANIMALS

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The Life of the *Picture Animals*.
Sarah Bogner and the Migrating Forms of Art History

by Irina Danieli

> "Forms always are tending toward realization; they do, in fact, realize themselves and create a world that acts and reacts."[i] *Henri Focillon*

The exhibition *Bildertiere* (*Picture Animals)* begins with a double return: spatially, to a place in southern Germany that Sarah Bogner associates with her origins and her family's pictorial heritage; and temporally, to an art history whose forms she is reexamining. At the Kebbel Villa, she presents paintings in which it is not animals that appear, but rather Bildertiere: beings that emerge from color, form, line, and art-historical memory.

The Triptych

The exhibition begins with a triptych, consisting of three canvases. Each of the three panel features three figures. Strange horse-people – though not centaurs – sit and stand before a hilly landscape in shades of grey and green. They lack the powerful four-legged animal body that would position them within ancient mythology. Each of them stands on two long legs; they appear both hazy and human-like. Their animal nature registers instead as a shift in their form. One thinks of transformation and disguise – of figures that have not yet decided which realm they belong to.

They are all painted in a pale fleshy pink, and they all have reddish-brown hairstyles. This earthy color connects them to the backgrounds of many of the flower still lifes in Bogner's work. The playful hairstyles crown the horse faces with fringes and ponytails – a small linguistic punchline within the painting, since a ponytail is, after all, a horse's tail too.

Their eyes remain strangely empty, almond-shaped, the insides hollowed out as if cut away: a mask, a paper cut-out. Sometimes one of the eye shapes is duplicated; is this a blurred gaze, or does the third eye offer greater clarity? This emptiness does not signify a lack of expression, but rather an unsettling openness: the figures gaze without their gaze being clearly interpretable. The arms of these horse-like beings swing in a sickle shape, echoing the form of the crescent moon that appears on the first and third panels, where it is grasped by one figure. Thus, a movement of a form begins on the left panel and runs through the entire triptych.

Picture Animals. A Moon

The figure on the left in the first panel, *Bildertiere. Ein Mond* (*Picture Animals. A Moon*) a moon, holds out her hand as if carrying or presenting the crescent moon, which opens towards the right. This offers a possible entry point for interpreting the composition. The gaze first falls on the crescent, follows its curve into the

figure's arm, and continues along the line of the back and buttocks to the central figure, who sits casually on the ground with her legs crossed. The shin of the figure on the far right, who is also seated on the hilly ground, closely follows the line of her back.

The back- and shin-lines of the two figures converge on a round shape above the knee. The figure seated on the far right holds it as if it were a treasure, almost a light. Could it be a duplicate joint, a ball, a fruit, a leaf-like form, or perhaps a cabbage? The shape remains uncertain. One might think that the first figure picked up the crescent moon, crumpled it up, and passed it on. The open crescent becomes a closed, round shape; the celestial body becomes a tangible body-like form.

Picture Animals. Three Graces

The middle panel, *Bildertiere. Drei Grazien* (*Picture Animals. Three Graces*), has a more symmetrical composition. Three figures stand back-to-back, their legs intertwining in a dance of pink lines. Two of them hold the round shape before them, continuing the movement of their arms. The figure in the middle looks to the left; she appears armless, while the sphere is drawn close to her face. Through this detachment from the body, the shape can be seen less as a ball and more as a full moon, outlined against a black background. What was previously a celestial body becomes an object, and what was an object returns to resembling a celestial body.

In *The Life of Forms*, Henri Focillon warns against confusing form with image or sign: „A sign signifies an object, form signifies only itself."[ii] Form, Focillon goes on to say, has a meaning – but it is a meaning entirely its own, a (…) value that must not be confused with the attributes we impose on it.[iii] It is precisely this ambiguity that we find in Bogner's oeuvre. The round shape does not simply denote a ball, an apple, or the moon. It takes on meanings without being reduced to any one of them. Its effectiveness as a form lies precisely in its ability to shift meaning. One moment it belongs to the body; the next, to the sky; then again, to the play or the gift. It is not fixed, but rather it creates relationships. To paraphrase Focillon: Form extends into the imaginary.

In Bogner's work, this versatility applies not only to the motifs but also to the painting style. Acrylic, ink, and egg tempera remain partially visible as distinct materials, while at other times they are mixed directly with one another. The surface emerges from a variety of material states: opaque and liquid, glossy and matte, added and removed again.

Picture animals. Two Crescents

The canvas on the right, *Bildertiere. Zwei Sicheln* (*Picture Animals. Two Crescents*), takes up the composition of the one on the left, but heightens its momentum. On the left, the picture-animal furthest to the edge dances with its upper body bent far backward. It strides to the left but turns its torso and head to the right. Its left arm seamlessly transitions into a crescent form, leaving it unclear whether the arm itself is crescent-shaped or if a crescent moon is emerging from this movement. The lower figure steps forward with one leg in a wide lunge, while the other leg is bent. The face is turned toward the viewer; with its uncanny features and double eye, it seems to look out of the picture knowingly. Further back, on a hill more strongly emphasized in yellow, the third figure crouches in profile. Above her, in the left corner of the picture, another crescent appears: a waning moon against a black background, or perhaps even a schematic, smiling mouth, similar to the smiling mouths of the horse-beings. The forms change their meaning depending on their location and context. They evade any clear interpretation, as though they possessed a life of their own. In the crouching figure's bent arm lies a turtle. The form does not remain confined to a single motif. It shifts from body to body, from sky to earth, from star to animal.

Forerunners – Afterimages

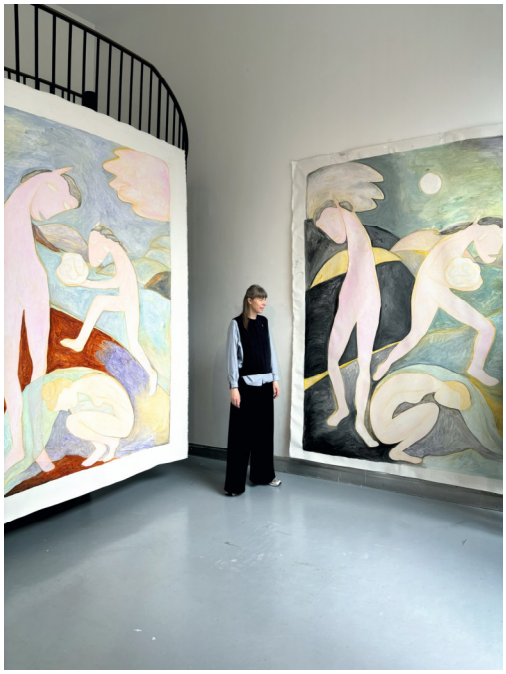
With this triptych as a starting point, Bogner's painting can be read as a passage through historical pictorial spaces, as a layering of pictorial orders. The terraced, hilly landscape evokes the tectonic spatial conception of the early Renaissance, reminiscent of the constructed distances found in the works of Andrea Mantegna.

The three figures in the middle panel, standing back-to-back, recall the iconography of the *Three Graces*, a firmly established motif in art history that also recurs repeatedly in Sarah Bogner's work. Their postures are reminiscent of Raphael's *Three Graces*, which are based on a classical pictorial type. The figures form a tight group, with their bodies closely bound to one another, while their heads and gazes turn in different directions. In Raphael's painting, the Graces hold apples in their hands. The composition also recalls Botticelli's *Primavera*, a work with which Bogner has repeatedly engaged: there too, the three Graces appear as a circular dance, a rhythmic group within a larger arrangement of movement, landscape, and transformation.

The paper-cut form of the figures brings Matisse into the circle of pictorial ancestors. The first thing that stands out is the way in which Sarah Bogner constructs her figures. Their bodies are neither modelled sculpturally nor built up through anatomical internal drawing. They appear flat, outlined, and at times as if cut out. However, this reduction does not diminish their vitality. On the contrary, precisely because the figures are not rendered in an illusionistic manner, they attain a distinctive air of movement. This is where the proximity to Matisse lies, especially in his conception of the image, where figure, ornament and surface cannot be separated from one another.

Paris – Paradise

The fact that Bogner does not use art-historical references as mere quotations but rather reworks them in a painterly manner is particularly evident in the works she created during her Paris residency at the Cité internationale des arts. There she engaged extensively with Matisse's *Luxe I*, which belongs to the collection of the Musée national d'art moderne. The figure carrying a bouquet in Matisse's work reminds her of Botticelli's Chloris in the Primavera, caught in the moment of transformation: touched by Zephyr and transitioning towards becoming Flora.
The metamorphosis is key: Chloris becomes a model of transformation that also permeates Bogner's work. Through Botticelli's *Primavera*, Bogner simultaneously touches on an art-historical resonance chamber – the afterlife of classical forms of movement in the Renaissance, as described by Aby Warburg. This is evident in the gestures, garments, hair, floral motifs and "animated accessory detail" that keep a pictorial world in motion beyond its historical origin.[iv] Rather than reconstructing the movement from an art-historical perspective, Bogner reactivates it in a painterly manner. Her paintings *Schreckliches Paradies I* and *Schreckliches Paradies II* [*Terrible Paradise I* and *II*] are examples of this approach. The titles alone subvert the Arcadian promise. Paradise is not presented as an unbroken idyll, but as a place where beauty, artifice and unease coincide. The titles also contain a play on words that is characteristic of Bogner's linguistic sensibility. 'Paradise' contains 'Paris': the city in which the paintings were created and a canonical art capital where the history of modern painting is condensed. For Bogner, the city becomes a space into which she projects her own exploration of painting. She engages not only with the major figures of this history, but also with Paris as a place, an image and a myth.



Sarah Bogner - OPEN STUDIO - Cité des Arts Paris, April 25th 2025 (Foto: Josef Zekoff)

Her attention to signs extends to language itself. Her titles create adjacent poetic spaces and allow words to merge into one another. In her poem *Alles ist romantisch* [*Everything Is Romantic*][v] too, the signs of painting interlace with the signs of language.

A third painting from the Paris period, *Schreckliches Paradies III*, can be read as an even more extensive study of Matisse. In it, one finds reminiscences of Matisse's motif of bathers as well as of *Baigneuses à la tortue* (*Bathers with a Turtle*), that enigmatic scene in which three women, one standing and two seated, gather around a small turtle. In Bogner's work, the turtle is initially almost hidden. In *Schreckliches Paradies III* it can be discerned in the blue against the dancing figures in the background, scraped off the canvas with an upended brush, almost like an engraving. It recurs in the bent arm of a crouching figure on the right-hand panel of the triptych. Just as in *Matisse's Bathers with a Turtle*, Bogner's figures also seem to turn towards this animal.

The turtle simultaneously introduces another temporal register. As an animal symbolizing slowness and longevity, it lends the scene a primeval quality. In Michael Ende's *Momo*, the famous turtle Cassiopeia is named after the constellation, linking this small, earthbound creature to a cosmic order of orientation, recurrence and time. In Bogner's work, the turtle rests in the figure's palm. At first, it is not immediately recognizable as an animal, but appears to be another rounded shape being held: a ball, a light or a small disc. Only upon closer inspection does it become a turtle. This mirrors the gesture in the first panel, in which a crescent moon is held in an outstretched hand. The celestial body returns as an animal body, a celestial form within a shell.

Still Life, Black Grounds

Two still lifes are on display in the exhibition space, positioned opposite the triptych. Both are small-format works with a cabbage at the center of the composition. The background is painted a lighter shade of grey up to the middle line, above which deep black takes over. As with the turtle, the cabbage has not simply been painted on but formed through a process of scratching and removing paint. Its leaves, folds and contours emerge through this painterly process of uncovering.

The still-life genre shapes Bogner's work as much as the long-legged horse-beings. Here, too, the focus is on analyzing and building upon the work of the Old Masters, while also questioning her own paintings. The cabbage is simultaneously object, plant, body, head, layering and surface. As we continue to follow Bogner through the eras of art history, the Baroque still life emerges in these paintings. Among her points of reference, Bogner cites Jacques-Charles Oudry. However, what is decisive here is not so much a direct adoption, but Oudry's attention to natural objects that become visual focal points in the painting, such as leaves, furs, feathers, fruits, animals and bodies. Manet's *White Peonies* can also be recalled here, those lavishly painted blossoms whose petals appear to have a heavy, almost physical quality against the dark background. Manet's black is a darkness that no longer merely signifies shadow or depth but also possesses a painterly presence. When Georges Bataille places Manet at the dawn of modern painting, this modernity can also be understood as a shift in pictorial means: color, surface and darkness depart from their supporting function to become the principal subjects of the painting.[vi]
In a nook behind the triptych, in line of sight from the entrance, hangs flower painting: *Bildertulpen* (*Picture Tulips*), tulips against a black background. This painting, too, is a *Nocturno.* The white roots branch out into three strands, the leaves sway, the blossoms are still half-closed. Once again, Bogner's poem *Alles ist romantisch* (*Everything Is Romantic)* comes to mind: "We are flowers / from the same bouquet / things have roots and fruits." Here, however, the bouquet does not appear as a lavish gift, as it does in the works of Matisse or Botticelli. It is understated, nocturnal, and still in the process of becoming.

Bogner refers to her paintings with black backgrounds as *'night pictures*' or *'nocturnes*'. The black is created using a mixture of ink and egg tempera; it appears liquid and deep, at once richly glossy and physically dense. Its purpose is not primarily to provide contrast, but to reveal form. In this exhibition space, the black is not merely background but becomes a unifying element. It draws the floor of the villa, the black grounds of the triptych, and the still lifes into a single spatial context. Against these dark surfaces, the figures, moons, cabbages and tulips stand out all the more distinctly. The blackness intensifies the frieze-like effect

of the triptych, allowing Botticelli's *Primavera* to come to life once more; its figures appear against a dark, dense backdrop of vegetation.

Picture-Ancestors

The format of Bogner's triptych itself evokes distant memories of altarpieces. This memory is reinforced by two smaller, older panels depicting Saints Isidor and Notburga of Rattenberg, which Sarah Bogner has positioned behind the triptych, on the villa's columns. According to family tradition, these were painted by her great-great-grandfather, Johann Baptist Bogner. Both figures are depicted in peasant attire against a stylized hilly landscape; attributes such as sickle, scythe, and jug point to labor, piety, and the rural veneration of saints.

Notburga's sickle and Isidor's scythe enter into an immediate dialogue with the triptych. The attributes of the saints' images appear in Sarah Bogner's work as fluid forms: the moon, the movement of an arm, a curved body and a semicircle. This continuation should not be understood merely in formal terms. It establishes a lineage in her painting, from the saints' panels, via the villa's columns, to the order of the triptych. The columns on which her great-great-grandfather's paintings hang thus become carriers of a family genealogy. Before them, a unique, transformed pictorial order unfolds in the triptych. A second narrative emerges. Alongside the great names of art history, there is a family-centered history of pictures that links painting to origin, landscape and form.

The Present of Forms

Bogner's paintings do not follow a linear art-historical narrative. They bring different eras into contact with one another. Their forms, movements and compositional flourishes continue to migrate, changing their meaning, and emerging in ever new pictorial orders.

In hindsight, the triptych can be seen as a painterly exploration of Botticelli's *Primavera*. Rather than adopting its figurative program, it is an exploration of individual visual forces: the number three and its repetition, the Graces, bodies arranged in rows, circular movements, dark vegetal surroundings and metamorphosis as a visual principle. Here, the *Primavera* is no longer the origin but becomes a counterpart in relation to which Bogner develops her own pictorial order. Warburg's idea of the afterlife of historical forms of movement and expression meets Focillon's conception of form having a life of its own. Mantegna's tectonic landscape, Raphael's *Three Graces*, Botticelli's Chloris, Matisse's *Bathers*, Oudry's still lifes, Manet's Black and Johann Baptist Bogner's peasant paintings of saints are not presented as references alongside one another. Instead, they form a pictorial space in which origin, myth, language and painting interpenetrate one another. Bogner's *Bildertiere* are creatures of a way of painting in which forms create a world that acts and reacts.

Sarah Bogner lives and works as a painter, printmaker, and publisher in Vienna. She studied fine arts at the Academy of Fine Arts in Munich and electroacoustic music at the University of Music and Performing Arts in Vienna. She was a member of three bands: Hellfire, Apparat Ha-se, and Steak. As a co-founder of Harpune, she has been expanding the concept of the artist's book since 2011 in collaboration with international artists—her paintings feature horse-like figures as well as still lifes of fruits and plants, often in very large formats, that integrate interior and exterior spaces and explore the magic of painting. Sarah Bogner's works have been presented in numerous solo and group exhibitions both in Austria and abroad, including in Zurich, Paris, New York, Munich, Heppenheim, Innsbruck, and Vienna.

[i] *Henri Focillon, The Life of Forms in Art*, translated from French by George Kubler [1989], New York: Zone 1992, S. 121; French first edition: *Vie des formes*, Paris: Ernest Leroux, 1934.
[ii] Focillon 1992 [1934], p.29.
[iii] Ibid. p. 35
[iv] See Aby Warburg, "Sandro Botticelli's 'The Birth of Venus' and 'Spring,'" in: idem, *Die Erneuerung der heidnischen Antik*e, vol. 1, Leipzig/Berlin: Teubner 1932, pp. 1–61, here pp. 5 and 26–44.
[v] *Everything is romantic (Bouquet)* by Sarah Bogner
We are flowers
From the same bouquet
Things have roots and fruits
Matters have beginnings and ends
Find the one that zooms in on you
No path unless you walk it
Everything is romantic
[vi] See Georges Bataille, *Manet*, Geneva: Skira, 1955. For further reading on Manet as a painter of the object of painting, see Michel Foucault's *Manet and the Object of Painting*, trans. Matthew Barr, London: Tate Publishing, 2009.