

SPIEGEL ONLINE**MoMA Retrospective: The Strange Brilliance of Isa Genzken**

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Courtesy Galerie Buchholz, Berlin/Köln

One of the most important artists of her generation, sculptor Isa Genzken's works of cryptic, haunting beauty sprang from a life fraught with addiction, mental illness and a grisly family history. Now, the Museum of Modern Art in New York is paying tribute to the Berlin artist with a retrospective.

Perhaps this visit isn't a good idea, after all. Isa Genzken fell a few months ago, suffering a head injury. She wasn't in the best of health before the accident, and her recovery has been slow. She walks gingerly through her studio, a bright and inviting space consisting of several large rooms in a former factory. It takes her a long time to get to the sofa in the back. When she sits down, a cigarette in her hand, she looks around the room. Her voice sounds halting, but her words are clear and forceful.

She is surrounded by her work. A piece of interior trim from an aircraft, complete with windows, is hanging in the back room. She often uses windows in her work. Photos taped to a board in another part of her Berlin studio depict the disheveled back of her head.

There is an unfinished work next to a window. It consists of a frame with spray-painted toy cars inside, as if they were in a cave. An obituary for Mike Kelley, which she cut out of a newspaper, is stuck to the back. Kelley was a California artist whose work often centered on the darkness of childhood. He committed suicide last year.

Seeing this art in the place where it is created, before it becomes public, seeing it where Genzken works and lives, and where she will only spend a few hours on this day before a nurse takes her back to the hospital -- it feels like an illegitimate invasion of someone's private space.

There used to be more to see. Until recently the studio was jammed with art, says Genzken from her sofa. Now most of it is in New York.

Genzken loves New York. She was a teenager the first time she visited the city, she says, when the Empire State Building was the tallest building in the world. Looking at it still makes her happy today.

The world's most important museum for contemporary art isn't far away. Starting in November, the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) is hosting a retrospective of Genzken's work, both to mark her 65th birthday and because, as the organizers write, she "is arguably one of the most important and influential female artists of the past 30 years." A contemporary artist could hardly achieve greater recognition. Despite how physically weak she appears to be at the moment, she plans to attend the opening no matter what. And, of course, she also intends to visit the Empire State Building once again.

The MoMA show, which will later travel to Chicago and Dallas, is a triumph for Genzken, albeit a distant one. She isn't nearly as famous in her native Germany, even though she has exhibited at the Documenta contemporary art exhibition three times, represented Germany at the Venice Biennale in 2007 and received many important awards.

'It Wasn't Always Easy'

Also with us in her studio on this day in Berlin is gallery owner Daniel Buchholz, who has been showing her work for the last 25 years. He flew to Berlin this morning from Cologne, where he lives. The story of Isa Genzken is also his story. Today she is his most important artist. But Buchholz always believed in her, even back when she wasn't doing well -- which was often the case.

Genzken has bipolar disorder and goes through manic and depressive phases, and she is also an alcoholic. She is constantly in treatment and fighting the disease. But anyone who knew her in the 1980s would have hardly believed she would still be alive today. There were times when Buchholz had to pull her off the streets, where she regularly ended up, her desolate condition on full display. "It wasn't always easy," he says.

When she began her studies, Genzken earned money as a model. She was a beauty, with long dark hair and sparkling brown eyes. Later, she documented her aging process and her own decline. She is a nonconformist in the German art world, perhaps more surprising and multifaceted than anyone else. "Yes, that might be true," she says with a smile.

In the 1970s, she began working with wood, an old-fashioned material that she carved into unusual geometric shapes. Since the 1980s, she has made sculptures out of concrete, which seem raw and unfinished and yet are as impressive as if they were made of marble. Two of these works are called "Pink Room" and "Small Pavilion." They are not very big, and yet they feel like monstrous bunkers on their delicate-looking steel pedestals.

Neon and Despair

Architecture is one of her subjects. As modern as the word architecture sounds, Genzken sees every structure as the ruin it could turn into. For her series of sculptures called "New Buildings," she leaned sheets of glass and plastic against each other. The objects are reminiscent of models of skyscrapers for a new modern age -- crystalline, highly aesthetic and yet somehow makeshift. She titled one of her shows "Fuck the Bauhaus," because so many architects invoked the Bauhaus after 1945 and yet did not adhere to its rules.

She repeatedly creates metaphors for vulnerability. She spray-paints twisted pieces of sheet metal with bright colors, hangs them on the wall and calls it "Gay Baby." Many of her images depict destruction. She builds tableaux that feel like three-dimensional film stills, brutal arrangements with plastic toys and small plastic figures on replicas of fields of ruins. She creates beauty from ugly things, even wheelchairs and shabby umbrellas. Humor is also a recurring theme in her work. For one installation, she placed an assortment of sunglasses onto busts of Nefertiti.

This is Genzken's world: minimalism and trash, neon and despair. Hieronymus Bosch, Marcel Duchamp, American concept art -- it all flows into her work, as does the mood in the clubs she visits and the mood in her own head.

Genzken has become more productive over time. This is surprising because, from a distance, her life seemed excessive and self-destructive, full of parties and escaping into intoxication. She has used these experiences to create self-deprecating, alienating images, like the work "X-Rays," which consists of actual X-rays of her head. One image shows a wine glass being hoisted to her mouth. Another depicts the bottle. As to how she got access to the X-Ray machine, Genzken is quoted in the MoMA catalog saying she "had a very nice doctor" and he "was drinking, like me."

'Filming Children'

Genzken constantly seeks eye contact with Buchholz. "He understands me," she says, sounding almost cheery. "What have you been doing lately?" she asks him. Buchholz believes that it's good for her to talk about herself and her art. But Genzken doesn't like being asked about the relationship between her works and her life. Suddenly everything she says sounds not like an answer but like a rebuff. She is sitting on a workbench now, swinging her legs and smoking.

There is something cryptic about Genzken's art, something mysterious that is unfathomable and yet perceptible. Her art is very private and sometimes irritating, almost as if she were using it as a coping mechanism.

Eight years ago, she opened an exhibition in Cologne called "Filming Children." At the center of the installation, a lone, forlorn-looking baby doll (which she often uses in her work) was standing beneath a Coca-Cola umbrella. Two plastic figures at consoles are both filming the doll and controlling it remotely.

In 1993, she authored a piece of writing called "Sketches for a Feature Film" for an exhibition catalog. In short bursts of text, as in a film script, she writes about bored and simultaneously overwhelmed parents,

who party a lot and love Maria Callas. They give their daughter the second name Hanne-Rose. Genzken later created a towering sculpture of a single rose.

Two concrete window frames, titled "Sophienterrasse" and "Mittelweg," are a reference to the upper-class part of Hamburg where she spent a few years of her childhood. But the heaviness of the concrete gives the pieces the feeling of memorials. Genzken talks a little about her childhood, and says that she liked her bourgeois surroundings. She falls silent for a moment, and then she says that she doesn't want to talk about her background.

In 1960, the family moved to Berlin, where her parents had inherited the villa of her grandfather, Karl Genzken. He was a Nazi through and through, a doctor who worked for the SS. He headed the medical office of the so-called "Death's Head" unit of the SS, which ran the concentration camps, and he was later promoted to chief of the medical office of the Waffen-SS. Genzken supervised military hospitals and was also responsible for medical care in the concentration camps. But treatment there was reserved for the overseers, while the inmates became the victims of brutish experiments. His office managed poison gas and tuberculosis experiments in the Sachsenhausen concentration camp, as well as experiments with typhus vaccines at Buchenwald and Neuengamme. Genzken was also responsible for the forced sterilizations performed in the camps.

He was sentenced to life in prison at the Nuremberg Medical Trial, but, like many other Nazi war criminals, he was released after a few years. The family used to visit him in Landsberg Prison in Bavaria. Genzken once hinted to Buchholz that she had been taken along on one of the visits, and that her grandfather had had an open umbrella in his cell. Umbrellas, like windows, are a frequent motif in her work.

Return to the Ellipse

In the final years of the war, Karl Genzken became interested in theosophy, a spiritually influenced worldview which seeks direct knowledge of the nature of divinity. Karl Genzken believed that Nazism needed a religious adjunct, and he contemplated a revival of ancient Germanic cults. He also made reference to the ellipse, a central shape in this ideology.

Every human being has his personal ellipse, he noted in a 16-page manuscript written in 1943, titled "Parable of an Interpretation of the Meaning of the World." He argued that it was possible to tell whether a person was a genius or merely possessed a weak personality by determining whether these "strength lines of will" approached a circular shape or were merely lines. He was asked about his notes during the Nuremberg Medical Trial.

Thirty years later, a previously unknown artist attracted attention with her elliptical wooden objects -- strong, surprising works. They bore no resemblance to anything that was generally on display in galleries and museums at the time. These "Ellipsoids" were up to 12 meters (39 feet) long. One of the works, "Twin," is a pair of ellipsoids that Isa Genzken painted black, red and yellow. The works are virtually considered classics today, and they too will be on display in New York.

Nicolaus Schafhausen, the curator who invited her to the Venice Biennale in 2007, considers the "Ellipsoids" to be among her most important works. Also a confidant of the artist, he was unfamiliar with her grandfather's writing.

Genzken's mother, who is now 90 and still lives in the villa in Berlin's Grunewald district, says that she doesn't believe that her daughter's art has anything to do with the grandfather.

Schafhausen says that nothing is coincidence in Genzken's art, and that of course the past and her family history is important in her work.

'I Am the Only Female Fool in the Art World'

Genzken met the painter Gerhard Richter as a student. He was teaching at the Arts Academy Düsseldorf and accepted her into his class. They married years later. It was Richter's second marriage.

Many years earlier, in the 1960s, Richter had used the crimes of Nazi doctors as a theme in some of his portraits, such as "Herr Heyde." Werner Heyde was a driving force behind the Nazis' euthanasia crimes, and he also worked with Karl Genzken. Richter's aunt had been murdered in the name of euthanasia, a crime for which his father-in-law from his first marriage, a Nazi doctor named Heinrich Eufinger, had been partially responsible. Richter painted a portrait of his aunt in 1965, based on an old photo. It was called "Tante Marianne."

In the 1990s, after her divorce from Richter, Genzken moved from the Rhineland back to Berlin. Many of the people who became important to her and still are today are members of a younger generation. They include gallery owner Buchholz, her artist friend Wolfgang Tillmans, and Schafhausen, who will dedicate an exhibition to her next year at the Kunsthalle Vienna, where he is the director. The title of the exhibition is, "I Am the Only Female Fool in the Art World."

Buchholz is the man who always knew what motivated her, even when she was spending time in New York. He had his spies there, he says. She didn't always let him help her, even when she had run out of money and hotels were unwilling to give her a room anymore. "We had our battles," he says. Perhaps, he adds, it's a good idea to be talking about these things, because there are many false rumors in the art world. But her art, as he points out, is real art and not the result of an emotional disorder. "She worked when she was truly capable of doing so," he says.

Genzken demonstrates what art can be -- how beautiful, ugly, defiant, true or clever it can be. The images she has found for the postwar decades -- her "World Receivers," her bunkers and her windows -- can truly devastate the viewer. She titled one of her shows, "Everyone Needs at Least One Window." Perhaps it was an allusion to her grandfather's prison call, or perhaps an expression of her longing for a different life, for a different outlook.

And now New York, the real city of her dreams since the days of her youth. As a young woman, she had contemplated staying there. But Germany is her home, she says.

What ties her to Germany?

That she feels good here and that it feels familiar to her, she says, but it almost sounds like a question.

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<http://www.spiegel.de/international/zeitgeist/moma-retrospective-to-highlight-german-artist-isa-genzken-a-929704.html>