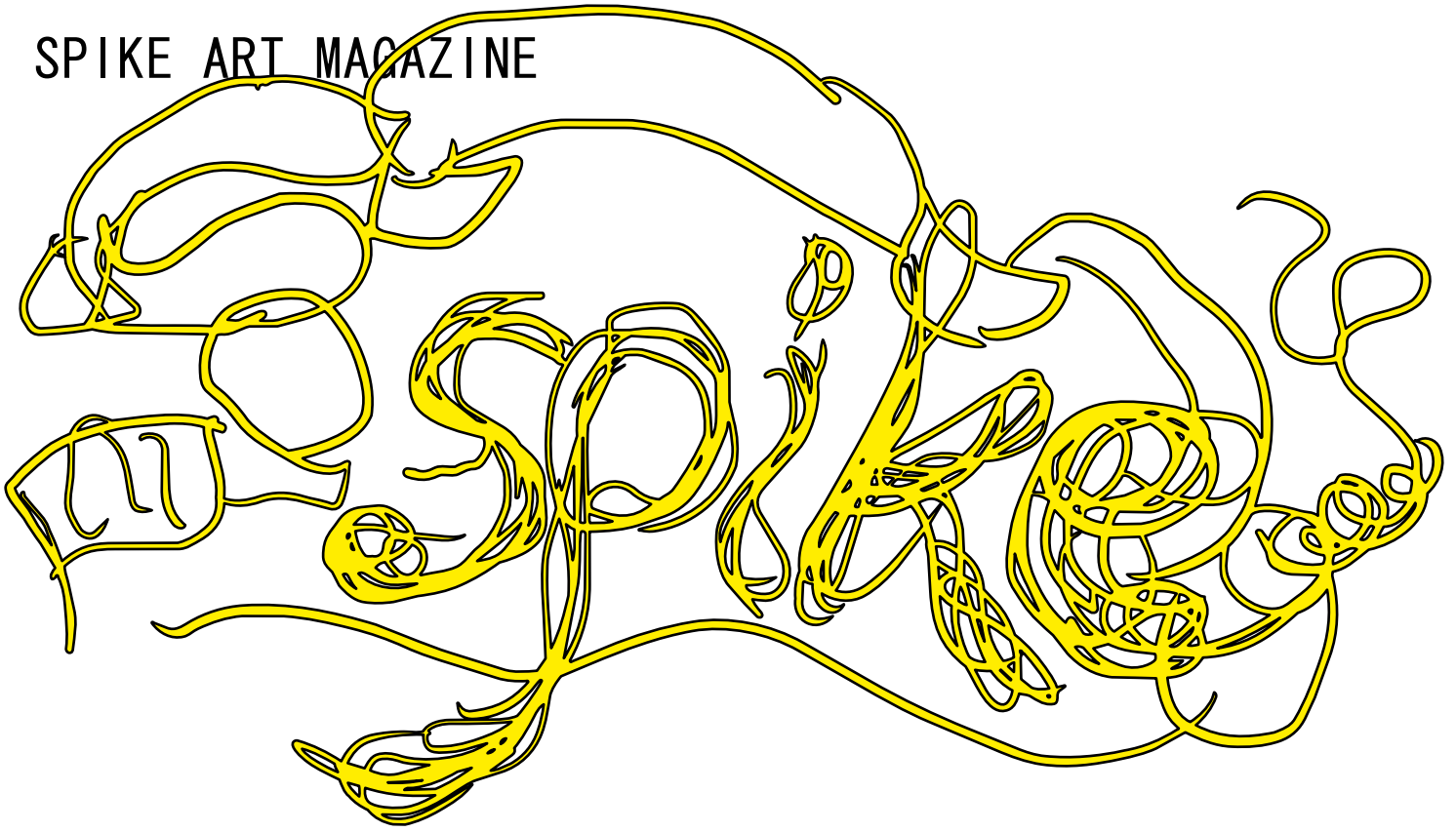
SPIKE ART MAGAZINE



ALL IS FULL OF SOUND

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AMNESIAC IMPASTO

JULIA WACHTEL

RETURN TO CONTENT A/B

Klemm's Berlin

10 SEP – 24 OCT 2026

BERLIN A single sweep across a Julia Wachtel (*1956) canvas compresses a century of mass images. Take *Return to Content* (2025), from the multi-panel "Landscapes" series of paintings she has been producing since the late 1980s, which interweave screen-printed found-footage images with her hand-painted cartoon "witnesses" based on archetypes of pop-folk culture. Starting from the left, we move here from a frozen TV still of a child tugging on a pink cow plushie thrice her size (bearing in its bottom-left corner the cautionary legend that gives the painting its title) to an awkward oil portrait of Gena the Crocodile (the sidekick to Cheburashka, the Soviet Mickey Mouse) in a red turtleneck sweater, on to a cropped-in still of morning newsprint from what appears to be the period of the Polish–Soviet War, 1919–21 (with headlines like POLES AND RED MEET AT MINSK further fragmented by a bright vertical streak of lemon yellow).

Here, as in the other recent paintings presented by Galerie Klemm's in Wachtel's first major solo show in Germany, her treatment of the evanescent visual detritus of contemporary life appears anything but arbitrary. By compositing these three distinct image sources into an uneasy *gestalt*, she forces our eye to engage a strange relay between them. The longer one spends in front of a Wachtel canvas, the more heightened, and disquieting, the dramaturgy of its elements becomes. Gena the Crocodile is positioned with his back turned to the right panel's reportage on the Soviet military defeats at the hands of Polish forces, and stares instead straight ahead with unblinking alarm into the neighboring panel at the blank visage of the pink cow who looks out at us (while the beaming young girl seeks to drag the cow across the plane of the composition, as if toward the past). Gena, like us, is oriented toward and seems paralyzed within the depthless stuffed content feed of the amnesiac now: a creature fully imprisoned within what the art critic Bob Nickas referred to as Wachtel's fascination with "the eroticized frozen moment."

Wachtel is usually spoken about in association with the Pictures Generation, who have been undergoing something of a boom in art-historical and curatorial attention in recent years, ranging from MAMCO Genève's group show "Pictures and After" (2023), to major solo European exhibitions of classic 1980s works by Robert Longo, Richard Prince, Cindy Sherman, Troy Brauntuch, and Jack Goldstein. Part of this resurgence is no doubt attributable to the implosion of Metro Pictures in 2021 (which represented many of the original "Pictures" participants) and these artists' subsequent representation by blue-chip galleries. There is also a sense, however, that this is a cohort of artists who can be retroactively conscripted to help us navigate our own information impasto. Confronted by an inundation in which the average urbanite Instagram user encounters upward of 2000 images a day (many of them AI confections), there is something undeniably prophetic about these artists' usage of "description as a stratigraphic activity," as Douglas Crimp observed in his canonical essay from 1979 on the "Pictures" show he had curated two years before – their appropriations revealing that "underneath every picture there is always another picture."



GRAB A FUCKING PENCIL, 2026, OIL AND ACRYLIC ON CANVAS, 127 × 272 CM



LEFT: *AUTO TUNE*, 2026, OIL AND ACRYLIC ON CANVAS, 114 × 160 CM
RIGHT: *RETURN TO CONTENT*, 2025, OIL, ACRYLIC AND FLASHE ON CANVAS, 140 × 290 CM

Courtesy: the artist and Klemm's, Berlin. Photos: Charlotte Walter

Yet despite the superficial commonalities her work bears with this generation of artists, there has always been something decidedly less arch and cool about Wachtel's approach to found imagery. To purloin two titles from her earlier series, her preoccupation with *narrative collapse* has an *emotional appeal* that is lacking, for instance, in the colder, more distanced appropriative tactics of a Prince or Brauntuch. In part, this comes down to the inclusion of her hand-painted cartoon "witnesses" within the image worlds she constructs. This affective charge is transmitted in another work from the Klemm's show titled *Grab a Fucking pencil* (2026). Here, the panels from left to right include screenprints of Susan Sontag, a cropped Reddit image of a "Shakespearean insult generator," a familiar Instagram meme of a blurry Eminem hurling a pencil toward us, and Wachtel's sketch of a weeping Humpty Dumpty with hands akimbo (based on an Edward Lear illustration). One appraisal of this narrative sequence would be to glibly highlight the context collapse or flattened postmodern hierarchies of image circulation that could dare to present Eminem or a Reddit meme in proximity to a mighty intellect such as Sontag (who, in any case has a pop cultural imprint). While the artist considers her own formal ambition to be "bring[ing] attention to those seams between images that the media presents as invisible – as seamless," the bereft, crumpled Humpty Dumpty who stands apart from this collection of digital signifiers introduces an emotional torque to the composition which prevents it from lapsing into another wry critique of horizontality. As with the stock-image clip-art cartoon of a woman on crutches in another painting from the show (*The Disappearance of the Sign,* 2017), the raw depiction of Humpty's breakdown functions as what Aby Warburg termed a *Pathosformel* – an emotionally charged visual trope – for expressing the psychic torment of a world made sick from the images it cannot but ingest. **GEORGE MACBETH**



EVERYTHING I ALWAYS WANTED, 2023, OIL AND ACRYLIC ON CANVAS, 282 × 76 CM

VIEWS