



Memories of the future, the Olbricht collection

Exhibition curated by Wolfgang Schoppmann

Wunderkammer curated by Georg Laue

Memories of the future is the eighth in a cycle of exhibitions of private collections which la maison rouge began in 2004.

Thomas Olbricht, a German endocrinologist born in Essen in 1948, has been collecting for over twenty-five years. He was introduced to art by his great-uncle, Kärl Stroher, an admirer of Pop Art and a collector of Joseph Beuys. With the support of his long-time friend Wolfgang Schoppmann, who is the curator of this exhibition, Thomas Olbricht has compiled a collection of over 2,500 works that is remarkable for its scope, extending from the sixteenth century to the present day.

In 2009, Olbricht founded *me Collectors Room* ('me' as in 'moving energies'), an art centre in Berlin which presents themed exhibitions of contemporary works, as well as a permanent *Kunst und Wunderkammer*, or cabinet of curiosities. Like la maison rouge, *me Collectors Room* also stages exhibitions of private collections,

the first being that of Antoine de Galbert who will be showing part of his collection there until 8th January 2012.

The exhibition takes its name from Laurent Grasso's *Memories of the Future*, shown here. This interweaving of past and future seems to reflect the collector's own approach, in that his interest in art developed, as it were, in reverse: first contemporary art, then older works. The older pieces in the Olbricht collection also seem to resonate in our present, shedding light from times past on works of the present day. It is this very idea of the past as a repository for the future (to borrow Damien Sausset's expression from the catalogue) that makes Olbricht's collection so special. While some collectors limit their field of action, Olbricht's acquisitions are unrestricted by temporal, geographical, or stylistic constraints of any kind. In a way, each new piece entering the collection opens up new possibilities of association and paves the way for the next. A rhizomic structure such as this throws up recurring themes and symbols - the body, religion, death, violence - which steer us through the exhibition.

In view of the large number of works shown, not all can be commented on here. Most of the older works are described individually in the exhibition catalogue.

The exhibition opens with a painting by American artist Ryan McGinness. Combining and remixing elements from existing works, from African sculpture to Jérôme Bosch, ornamental rococo scrolls to aboriginal symbols, transformed into coloured pictograms, McGinness' painting is symbolic of the post-modern citing of references to the past for purposes of irony, distancing, pastiche or the grotesque: an approach which features prominently in this exhibition.

Death, or rather its interpretations, allegories and symbols, is present throughout the Olbricht collection. The very fact that it is impossible to portray is no doubt why death has been, and remains, a recurrent theme for artists. Albrecht Dürer's *Knight, Death and the Devil* (1513) has become an emblematic image of the subject. It depicts a Christian knight undismayed by worldly traps and inner torment, symbolised by death and the devil. Nearby works clearly demonstrate the ambition and excellence of the Olbricht collection. In the first display case, the astonishing figure of **Death as an archer** with tattered flesh, ready to fire its next arrow, was part of the Yves Saint Laurent collection. Beside it, an extremely rare Renaissance automata clock, no doubt from some princely cabinet of curiosities, offers an unusual expression of the vanitas theme. Displaying all the usual symbols of the passage of time (snail, flaming torch, urn, skull, hour-glass), its

ingenious mechanism causes a snake, an allusion to original sin, to rear up out of the skull's eye-socket when the clock strikes the quarter. The same symbols appear in the painting by Frans Pourbus, alongside Christian references such as the snake and the bitten apple at the putto's feet; a reminder of Adam's fall, which led to Man losing his immortality.

These rare and exquisitely crafted pieces are worthy of the greatest museums (as are others later in the exhibition). Opposite them hangs a modern vanitas in thirty-five photographs. Nicholas Nixon's masterful *The Brown Sisters* shows the advance of both life (wonderfully captured by the medium of photography) and death, in photographs of his wife and her three sisters, taken each year for the past thirty years. As image follows image we appreciate the complicity and affection that bind these women together throughout the various stages of their lives. Little by little, the sisters' faces and general appearance change as the irrevocable passage of time takes each of them a step nearer to old age and death. Implicit in the series are the inevitable final picture and the unbearable question – who will be last?

When Thomas Olbricht started collecting in the mid-1980s, his main interest was German artists of the post-war period, including Gerhard Richter and Sigmar Polke, both of whom studied at the Düsseldorf School of Fine Arts. Their works shown here are somewhat at odds with the rest of the exhibition, and indeed with the Olbricht collection as a whole, as the collector's interest in pieces which explore what it means to be human leaves little room for **abstract art**. In these paintings from the latter half of the 1960s, both Richter and Polke detach themselves from abstract modernism. Polke parodies the modernist grid by replacing white canvas with fluffy cotton flannel, strips of which define the areas where the artist has intervened. Black squares refer us to the work of Malevitch, considered to be the supreme reference in Western abstract painting. It also broaches issues at the very heart of post-modern thought, such as authorship and originality - questions which are also relevant to Richter's work. From the 1960s, Richter based his paintings on black and white amateur photographs or pictures published in newspapers, which he copied scrupulously before using his brush to blur the outlines before the paint had dried. During this same period, he produced monochromatic grey paintings, moving indifferently between abstract and figurative to reveal the conceptual dimension of his artistic practice.

Painting, especially **figurative painting**, features significantly in the Olbricht collection which seeks out a certain level of technique and a frequently

intriguing iconography. Great names stand alongside very young artists, most of whom have never been shown before in France. *La Reine Blanche* by Pierre et Gilles, the collector's nod to a stereotypical image of France, is first in a room which considers different attitudes to painting. *The Modern Painter* by the British artist Richard Wathen can be seen as an allegory of the artist weighed down by the "burden" of abstract modernism, represented by the two cube shapes. The work also combines past and present. While no doubt alluding to the past (Bruegel's peasants, perhaps?), the background and the figure's apparent isolation convey a feeling of strangeness that is typical of the contemporary world. Jean-Luc Moerman's work reveals its source to the extent of making it the very medium: using a poster of Lucas Cranach's painting of *The Suicide of Lucretia* (a figure from Ancient Rome), Moerman covers Lucretia's body with tattoos, and in doing so gives this legendary woman a real body and returns her to the chain of life.

Like Wathen, German artist Jonas Burgert often starts with a self-portrait which he reproduces in a series of complex, mysterious settings: the impassive artist is represented in various garbs and sizes, frozen in theatrical poses. Different eras, references and civilisations combine to suggest an obscure ritual performed in the theatre of painting.

The technique and style which Laurent Grasso uses for his *Studies Into the Past* are directly inspired by the Italian and Flemish Primitives. However, the artist inserts elements from his own videos (weightless stones, clouds on the ground or, as here, eclipses) to create a "fictional historical memory of [his] work." The logical sequence of contemporary artist taking inspiration from an earlier artist seems to be reversed, clouding the visitor's perception.

Natural curiosities, dubbed **naturalia**, took pride of place in *Wunderkammern*, the "cabinets of wonder" in which Renaissance nobility and scholars displayed their collections of precious artefacts. Exotic animals, whether stuffed as trophies or faithfully reproduced, were legion. One such creature is the rhinoceros, whose horns were prized for their supposedly curative or antidotal properties. It is represented in Swiss naturalist Conrad Gesner's *Thierbuch* (book of animals), which describes all the species known to man at the time of its publication in 1563. Its reproduction of a rhinoceros is in fact a copy of an engraving by Dürer, made fifty years earlier and completely fictitious, as neither Dürer nor Gesner had ever seen a rhinoceros in the flesh. It reappears in the marquetry of a seventeenth-century console table. Charles Matton's "box" projects us into a twentieth-century artist's studio, which is both a compilation of rhinoceros

iconography and a homage to Eugène Ionesco. Tortoise and turtle shells, corals, insects and butterflies conclude this presentation.

The next section of **portraits of women** is concerned more with introspection and identity than any form of idealisation. **Marilyn Minter's** work explores the disassociation between real women and the fantasy version so often played out in the media, nowhere more than in fashion and advertising. Make-up, which is instrumental in creating this divide, is the subject of many of her paintings, which target the eyelids, eyes and lipsticked mouths that symbolise glamorous, sexy women. Her close-ups and isolated body parts also suggest the erotic imagery that is often an inspiration for fashion trends. The sensuality that emanates from *Goldlicks* owes more to the shiny materials used to make the picture than to the subject it portrays. In contrast, make-up is absent from *Ungroomed*, **Marlene Dumas'** full-frontal close-up of a woman's genitals.

Margherita Manzelli's paintings of women frequently resemble self-portraits, isolated in abstract landscapes that focus our attention on their strange presence. While the young woman in **Olaf Metzel's** *Turkish Delight* strikes a surprisingly similar pose to Manzelli's, she appears entirely absorbed by her inner world. The luxurious gold surface contrasts sharply with the unidealised, drooping body of an ordinary young woman. Behind her, **Franz Gertsch's** *Irene* holds our gaze both for its size and its incredible photo-realism. In the 1970s, the Swiss artist photographed the people in his life – bohemian friends, underground artists, musicians (including singer Patti Smith) – and transformed these photos into monumental paintings. Works by the young German artist **Johannes Kahrs**, which feature close by, are similarly based on photographs. Kahrs, however, is more interested in the flaws that such snapshots can contain, and faithfully reproduces blurring or tears in the paper.

John Currin rose to fame in the early 1990s with a series of controversial portraits of young women, painted using traditional techniques but to bizarre physical canons. Here, the figure of a young girl with enormous breasts seems straight out of a soft porn magazine. These portrayals of women as sex-objects, and Currin's leaning towards a kitsch form of "bad painting" which he parodies in his intentionally crude depiction of faces, do not sit comfortably with political correctness.

The work of Dutch photographer **Desiree Dolron** and American photographer **Cindy Sherman** refer to existing, codified images. In her *Xteriors* portrait series,

Dolron's chiaroscuro photographs are inspired by fifteenth-century Flemish pictorial tradition. The image shown here is the only idealised portrait in the exhibition; all the others reject the traditional canons of female beauty. **Cindy Sherman** continues her exploration of the stereotyped female identity with the staged self-portraits she began in the 1970s. Here, she parodies the appearance, postures and sartorial codes of ageing wealthy women from American high society, decked out in their finest.

Marking the transition between two sections are two heads by Swiss artist **Eva Aeppli**, who is best known in France for her fabric sculptures *Hommage aux Déportés* inside Tinguely's *Cyclop* in Milly-la-Forêt. The heads express in turn terror and a return to peace. **Dawn Mellor** uses film stills for her *Prosecutors* series, which includes this portrait of Juliette Binoche. Whereas the media tend to portray celebrities as objects of fascination, Mellor's intention is deliberately iconoclastic: the abruptly applied paint deforms Binoche to the point of being scarcely recognisable; meanwhile, she appears oblivious to the bloody hands in front of her.

The works collected by **Thomas Olbricht** rarely show a world that is unruffled and at peace but one that is ruled by **war and violence**. Man's cruelty is shown in all its many forms in often disturbing works, whether the genuine cruelty captured in press photographs, or as staged violence. Swedish artist **Johanna Karlsson** has chosen a much older source in her transposition to sculpture of **Jacques Callot's** *The Hanging*, a print from his *Miseries and Misfortunes of War* series (1633) which depicts the ravages of the Thirty Years War in eighteen etchings, also presented here.

Jake and Dinos Chapman have been obsessed with Goya's black-and-white nightmares since the early 1990s. In *Sex I*, the two British artists have recreated in three dimensions a scene from one of Goya's *Disasters of War* etchings (1810-1815) in which the Spanish master portrays the atrocities committed by French troops in Spain. Contrary to its title, *Sex I* portrays only death and decay. Goya's flayed figures are transformed into decomposing clown corpses. The apparent tackiness of the work (despite being cast in bronze) together with an accumulation of repugnant detail make this a grotesque more than shocking sculpture.

Marc Quinn, one of the Young British Artists of the late 1990s, also claims Goya as an inspiration for *Mirage*, although the sculpture refers to an image that was seen worldwide in 2004: that of an Iraqi prisoner in Abu Ghraib being tortured by

American soldiers. The hooded prisoner, who is positioned like Christ on the cross, has become a symbol of random violence and barbarity. This is also the subject of *Das Recht* by German artist **Daniel Richter**. It shows two men attacking a fallen horse with blind savagery. Is it an allusion to the scene which Nietzsche saw in the streets of Turin, and which is believed to have precipitated his mental breakdown?

A series of **newspaper photographs** on the opposite wall retraces some of the twentieth century's defining moments (Spanish Civil War, Second World War, Vietnam War, student demos in the 1960s, etc.) which have become part of the universal psyche and are now deemed "iconic." Brazilian artist **Vik Muniz** has reproduced one of the most famous - Robert Capa's photograph of the death of a Spanish Republican soldier - in coloured toys.

At the opposite end of the scale to these works that put man centre-stage, two installations form a **conceptual parenthesis**. The piece by the **Claire Fontaine** artist collective cites Carl André's *Lever* sculpture in both its title and form: 137 fire bricks laid side by side. Each brick is wrapped in the cover of Gilles Deleuze's *Difference and Repetition*, in which the French philosopher posits that repetition cannot be defined as saying the same thing, as an intersection is always created in which a new thought can take hold. The concept is applied tautologically in Claire Fontaine's installation, and at the same time offers a possible key to the exhibition's narrative. **Kitty Krauss'** installation consists of sentences gleaned online whose content may be medical, philosophical, literary or legal, but whose subject is always decapitation. On the floor sits a bronze skull-cap that was used to treat migraines in the nineteenth century.

Two installations on opposite walls question the concept of **original work**. Since the late 1970s, **Allan McCollum** has been using mass production processes in his art, thereby questioning the value of the unique work and hence the role of the artist. His *Plaster Surrogates* reduce painting to its smallest common denominator: an area of colour applied to a medium, framed and hung on a wall: all key elements if the viewer is to identify the object as an artwork. **Maurizio Cattelan** enlisted a specialist in Identikit portraits to produce *Super Us (NY)*. The subsequent portraits correspond to descriptions of the artist by family and friends. The drawings emphasise how subjective perception can be; they are all very similar yet nevertheless unique. The result is a kaleidoscope picture of the artist whose real "me" remains elusive.

A pupil of Richter at the Düsseldorf Academy of Fine Arts, **Thomas Schütte** was instrumental in the revival of German figurative sculpture in the mid 1980s, alongside Balkenhol and Baselitz, among others. His two large female reclining figures in the **patio** put forth an abundance of references to the history of modern sculpture, in particular the female nudes of Aristide Maillol, Henry Moore and Henri Matisse. Starting from small clay figures, Schütte has so far made eighteen monumental sculptures of women, each mounted on the roughly welded steel table which the artist prefers to the more traditional plinth. The women's contorted poses offer radically different images when viewed from different angles.

The artists shown in the gallery around the patio all explicitly draw their inspiration from the **history of art**, and all work with traditional media. American **George Condo** has made reinterpretation of the work of his predecessors central to his own work. The composition of *Symphony I* recalls both a deposition from the cross and a grotesque, gaudy theatre stage à la James Ensor. **Julie Heffernan** puts herself centre-stage in surroundings redolent of seventeenth-century baroque. Her self-allegories are ambitious works which manage to integrate every genre into a single painting - still life, bouquets of flowers, hunting scenes, portraiture and landscape - all painted in obsessively minute detail and short-circuited by surreal skits played out on the canvas. **Marc Quinn's** *Catman* carries on the tradition of artists sculpting busts of eminent figures...except his model was a "freak," a man who remodelled his face to resemble a cat: not, then, an ideal or exemplary figure at all. **Wolfe von Lenkiewicz's** references are extremely precise. He has appropriated an etching by **Martin Schongauer** (the original etching is shown next to Lenkiewicz's work) and replaced the impassive Saint Anthony, surrounded by demons, with a very different icon: Snow White. According to Lenkiewicz, a work from the past does not find meaning solely in the context of its own era; artists too can give meaning, on condition they are not afraid to take on a "sacred" masterpiece. Another example is the painting by **Marianna Gartner**, directly inspired by Enguerrand Quarton's *Pieta de Villeneuve-Lès-Avignon*. Gartner has copied the pose and technique of the fifteenth-century original in the Louvre, but further highlights Christ's humanity by portraying him as a tattooed young dropout. **Antoine Roegiers'** video is the continuation of Bruegel the Elder's etchings, *The Seven Cardinal Sins* (1557, presented in conjunction with the video). It transports us into the Flemish master's world by bringing to life its population of women, men, demons and other hybrid creatures.

Belgian artist Thomas Lerooy manipulates references to famous monumental sculptures, transposing and combining them to produce something new. In this drawing, monuments of classical architecture grow like cancers on the surface of one of the statues guarding the tomb of Emperor Maximilian I, while his version of *The Kiss* opposes two putti with skulls for heads. Are they freaks of nature, Siamese twins preserved in formaldehyde, in the way such specimens were often displayed in **cabinets of curiosities**, or are they facetious little "pissers" like the *Manneken Pis* in Brussels, reminded of their future fall from glory? The macabre, grotesque universe of Symbolists such as Félicien Rops and James Ensor is but a short step away.

The Eye Balled Wall, an installation by the FORT German artist collective, takes us into a small billiards room where discreetly hijacked objects (balls made of coal or egg, cues sharpened into points, shoes sticking out from behind a curtain) give the scene a dreamlike quality while hinting that something mysterious is about to happen.

A powerful thread runs through Thomas Olbricht's collection: that of **vanitas** and *memento mori* ("remember you will die"), works or objects intended to remind man of his fleeting existence, and that material goods and life on earth are but vanities. The spirit of these classical works still resonates today with the preoccupations of our own era, which is why curator Wolfgang Schoppmann has chosen to juxtapose works from the past and from the present day.

Giampaolo Bertozzi & Stefano Casoni work extensively in painted ceramic. Many of their staggeringly lifelike pieces explore the vanitas theme, revisited in the light of modern consumer society. The felled Christmas tree in *Rebus* is flanked by two parrots, symbolising human frivolity, while earthly pleasures are depicted explicitly in the scenes from the *Kama Sutra* which are painted on the baubles. This ironic "wilting" encourages us to seize the day and enjoy life's pleasures before it is too late...

The vanitas traditionally takes the form of still life painting, a genre which flourished, in the Netherlands in particular, in the early seventeenth century. These paintings were primarily intended as symbolic, moral warnings. In Franciscus Gysbrechts' trompe l'œil, which symbolises the futility of knowledge, the presence of ears of corn nevertheless intimates the possible hope of resurrection. In the work of Flemish painter Osias Beert, German artist Gottfried von Wedig,

and Sébastien Stoskopff from Alsace, flowers, fruit and food remind us of the fragility and inevitable decay that awaits all matter, as well as providing a pretext for demonstrating technical virtuosity in the realistic portrayal of nature. Works by Cindy Sherman, Bertozzi & Casoni and Mat Collishaw offer contemporary interpretations of this theme. The latter's large format, chiaroscuro still lifes of last meals requested by prisoners on Death Row in Texan jails recall the Flemish school. It is impossible to dissociate the beauty of these photographs from the idea that all these men, whose name is also the title of the work, were about to die.

Georg Laue, a specialist in **cabinets of curiosities**, has been advising Thomas Olbricht for the past ten years and has been instrumental in enriching and displaying Olbricht's own collection. The precursors of modern-day museums, the purpose of these *Wunderkammern* was to amaze their public while presenting a *theatrum mundi*: a reproduction of the world in miniature with the intent of showing the universal bonds between everything on earth, and between Man, Nature and God. Over thirty such objects, each of outstanding quality, are displayed in this section of the exhibition as a *Wunderkammer* for our time.

Marquetry cabinets, like the one which takes pride of place in the centre, were an important feature of any *Wunderkammer*. These highly prized items of furniture were also used to display medals and various small objects. The cabinet is surrounded by a selection of the kind of objects typically found in *Wunderkammern*: artworks (*artificialia*) such as sculptures and other objects made from ivory, usually with religious or moral connotations; unusual flora and fauna (*naturalia*) such as coral branches; scientific objects (*scientifica*) such as the anatomical models which enabled scientists to explore the human body; artefacts from distant lands (*exotica*) such as the stuffed crocodile hanging from the ceiling, a standard feature of such cabinets; and, lastly, enigmatic objects (*mirabilia*). Coveted for the rare materials and expertise with which they were made (miniature sculpture, straw marquetry, wood-turning, etc.), these objects were also a focus for learning and thought that concentrated several layers of meaning.

This tradition can clearly be observed in Alastair Mackie's sphere, made from mice skulls (in the central display case), and, further along, Kate McCWire's feather trophies. Both demonstrate meticulous virtuosity and technical mastery applied to simple organic matter. The same can be said of Liza Lou's sculpture, *Homeostasis*, an example of the glass-bead encrusted work which the American artist has been creating since the mid 1990s. Like certain *mirabilia*, the beautiful,

embroidery-like surfaces and the obsessive rigour which the technique demands elicit admiration and amazement.

Summit, by Kris Martin, consists of a rock on whose summit the artist has placed a tiny, fragile paper cross. It is an allegory but also mockery of human ambition (to conquer summits and leave one's mark), as well as an obvious religious symbol. There is also a clear allusion to the life of Christ in *The Last Supper* by Helmut Stallaerts, in which the twelve apostles have been replaced by the ceramic portraits usually associated with funerary art. Painted additions lend the work a somewhat surreal edge.

Still life painting reached maturity in the seventeenth century, when artists specialised in specific subjects such as **flowers**. While the original objective was scientific – to illustrate all known species of flower as realistically as possible – these pictures became increasingly decorative. Herman Henstenburgh is renowned for his highly skilled watercolour drawings, which are both accurate from a botanical point of view and at the same time stand as artworks in their own right. British artist Glenn Brown appropriates and deforms familiar works by famous painters. While on the one hand, his paintings happily reproduce the heavy impasto that is, to our surprise, absolutely flat, in his sculpture Brown literally squeezes and kneads the material covering a bronze statuette (whose hand is seen sticking out), thus transforming it into a colourful abstract bouquet. Ged Quinn's paintings are always full of references to previous eras as well as dotted with skilfully disguised allusions to contemporary civilisation. His monumental bouquet of flowers might well be the work of a seventeenth-century Flemish master...were it not for the reflection of a levitating young girl, maybe taken from the cult horror film *The Exorcist*, that we can see on the surface of the vase.

Everywhere, **religious iconography** lies just below the surface. Images of the Garden of Eden, as it appears in a picture of Adam and Eve by one of Brueghel the Younger's followers, turn up in Julie Heffernan's painting. But at the centre of her earthly globe are signs that humanity is ruled by chaos. Stephan Balkenhol's work echoes the tradition of religious, polychrome mediaeval sculpture as much in its theme, martyrdom, as in its material, wood, and its front-facing figure. Yet the heavy-handed way the wood has been carved, the prominence he gives to the creative process, even the plinth which, as always in Balkenhol's work, is part of the sculpted figure and cannot be separated from it, demonstrate the work's undeniable engagement with the challenges addressed by twentieth-century sculpture. It is nevertheless astonishing that Balkenhol should show an interest

in the story of Saint Vitus (who is said to have stepped unharmed from a cauldron of boiling lead), or that Gitte Schäfer should revive the iconography of St Sebastian's martyrdom.

Christ is notable by his absence in this picture by Thierry De Cordier, who has hidden the image of Jesus on the cross behind a veil of black paint, thereby "uniting in its ambivalence love and hatred of the divine." The classical image of Christ laid in the tomb imposes itself on the viewer of Sam Taylor-Wood's photograph of a sleeping man.

Fear of death is an extremely personal and private sentiment, yet absolutely universal. The **memento mori** and other allegories used to express this feeling transcend time and place. Thomas Olbricht has gathered such works in a "collection within the collection." A selection is displayed here in what one might call a "cabinet of skulls." They are dominated by a Kendell Geers neon, from a series in which the South African artist transforms famous depictions of the crucifixion (in this case by Goya) into illuminated signs. Christianity sees death as no more than a journey to eternal life, and therefore the cemetery which George Shaw has painted in symbolic tones is a final resting place for the body alone. The noble man in this painting by the Master of the 1540s appears well aware of this, as he calmly points at a skull. In Cindy Sherman's photograph from the *History Portraits* series, Saint Jerome contemplates a skull, seemingly oblivious to his ridiculous garb.

In contrast with Christian iconography, in which death leads to resurrection and eternal life, death in a contemporary context can be totally devoid of spiritual meaning. The hyperrealistic skull which fills every available inch of canvas in René Wirths' painting, or which Damien Hirst has placed on a dissection table, leaves little room for hope. Instead they elicit the unsettling and unanswerable question: why?

References to art from previous centuries continue to make their presence felt. The fidgety skeletons in the small paintings by Australian artist Terry Taylor suggest the mediaeval tradition of the *Danse Macabre*, or Dance of Death, just as much as they recall voodoo rituals. Their precision and detail is in sharp contrast with the stark, monochrome rendering of Katharina Fritsch's *Doktor*, an archetypal and chilling image of death.

Underneath an eighteenth-century double skull, a number of contemporary works revive traditional stagings of skulls. The actual skull of a fourteenth-century monk now boasts gold teeth courtesy of Kris Martin; a double ceramic head by Carolein Smit recalls Janus; Maurizio Cattelan offers a humorous take on funerary

art in the form of flowers in a vase made from a skull; the **Chapman Brothers** prefer the grotesque, bedecking their worm-eaten skull with a red nose and the ears of a faun. Most impressive of all is, without doubt, the skull by **John Isaacs**, retaining as it does a human appearance with the flesh and muscles of the face revealed as in an eighteenth-century wax anatomical model. Meanwhile, the tree's green leaves bring to mind the cycle of life.

David LaChapelle's 2003 series *Jesus is my Homeboy* stages episodes from the life of Christ in contemporary settings with hip-hop apostles. Such anachronistic portrayals are in fact direct descendents of religious painting, in the manner of Veronese transposing Biblical scenes to sixteenth-century Venice.

The works shown in the basement are at once strange and familiar, echoing what Sigmund Freud called the *unheimliche* (the **uncanny** or disturbingly strange): a repressed memory which suddenly resurfaces in the midst of the reassuring rationality of everyday life, inspiring a feeling of anxiety that we cannot pin down.

The body is central to all these works, each time subjected to transformation, violation and disfigurement. The change of scale is barely visible in **Terence Koh's** sculpture of himself, often the subject of his work, as a boy curled up on the floor. In *Untitled #302*, a mannequin takes the place of **Cindy Sherman**, posing as a garishly made-up woman whose dislocated body suggests the fantasies and impulses that are an undercurrent in **Hans Bellmer's** dolls. **Paloma Varga Weisz's** little man dreams on, seemingly indifferent to the bulbous growths sprouting from his body. He belongs just as easily in a children's fairy tale as a medical encyclopaedia, both of which the artist cites as sources for her strange, disturbing, isolated figures. In addition to her video and fashion photography work, **Floria Sigismondi** practises fine art photography that is infused with Surrealist and Neo-Gothic references. Next to her self-portrait, a collage with numerous references, is a faceless mother in a setting that is typical of her work; a world she describes as "an entropic underworld of tortured souls and omnipotent beings."

Australian artist **Patricia Piccinnini** describes a species in the throes of genetic mutation, part animal, part human. Their postures are so similar to our own that we are forced to empathise, despite their frightening transformation.

Something went terribly wrong for **Gregor Schneider's** "longed-for child." Known chiefly for his unnerving architectural installations (including *Susser Düft*, which was shown at la maison rouge in 2008), Schneider has made several of these delusive dummies, abandoning their seemingly lifeless bodies in bin-liners for

visitors to discover as they turn a corner, as though stumbling upon a crime scene. By giving his victims the appearance of a child, Schneider gives substance to our worst nightmares.

The animated films by Swedish artist **Nathalie Djurberg** seem harmless at first, but quickly turn into something of a much more sordid nature. The little drama played out here tells of ageing, illness, physical decrepitude, senility, and sacrifice... which goes without its just rewards. At first glance, **Michael Kirkham's** little black dog also seems to belong to the world of childhood, but in eleven drawings the artist reveals the dog's darker side, made up of wanderings, sex and death.

From Dürer to artists working today, the Olbricht collection explores timeless existential themes. It prompts us to consider our condition today and how it relates to the past through works which appeal first and foremost to our emotions and affects. Like the cabinet of curiosities which inspires it, the element of surprise contained in this collection can lead equally to amazement or to a completely new understanding of the works.