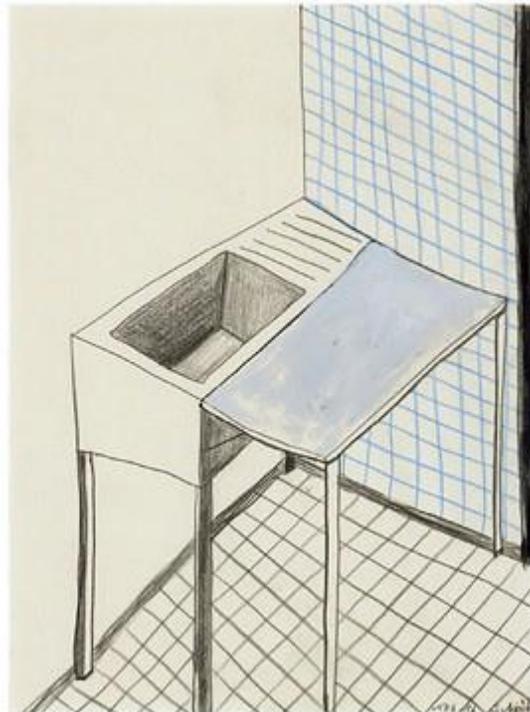


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ARTFORUM

Sabine Moritz
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By Elisa Schaar (January 2017)



Sabine Moritz, *Laboratory 4*, 2016, colored pencil and oil on paper, 12 5/8 × 9 3/8".
From the series "Laboratory," 2016.

In the work of Sabine Moritz—who emigrated from the German Democratic Republic to West Germany as an adolescent in 1985, and who has since developed a practice consistently focused on drawing and painting—themes of history and memory feature prominently. This concern with temporality is suggested not only by motifs from the past (both historical and personal) and ones that insinuate the passage of time, but also by their recurrence across her oeuvre. In this exhibition of new paintings and drawings, altered versions of buildings, boats, flowers, and skulls reappeared, interspersed with abstract works.

A melancholic painting in heavy impasto showing a large boat in front of a mountainous landscape, *Paradise (Deception Island 2)*, 2016, turned out to be a repetition of an earlier painting. In the exhibition, it was paired with another image of a boat, *Dusk*, 2016, painted

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in a different, smoother style, suggesting that Moritz is less interested in her particular referents than in the relation between subject and surface, and in the boat in general as a “vessel” for ideas about time. A pair of differently cropped, scaled, smeared, and smudged paintings of a stray dog, *Ghost Town I and II*, 2016—a new motif based on a news photograph from the region of Fukushima, Japan—exemplified how she decontextualizes her sources. And rather than painting violent events, she will often depict their aftermath, a false idyll, leaving unclear what happened.

By deploying serial repetition, Moritz’s works on paper not only recall places from the past but offer metareflections on memory as a process. “*Storm*,” 2015–16, a series of twenty-four painted lithographs of a drawing, after a photograph, of a cabin in the snow that she had depicted in gradually more intensive and more abstract ways, not only unfroze the moment captured in the photograph but, with the cabin as storage space in both the literal and figurative sense, explored how memory retrieval is colored by the emotional landscape inside. In contrast, “*Laboratory*,” 2016, a series of drawings of an interior, revolved around the very absence of an image. Rendered in the same idiosyncratic style as the much earlier “*Lobeda*” drawings, 1991–92, in which Moritz had revisited the lost places of her childhood upon arrival in the West, “*Laboratory*” imagines the unfamiliar site of a traumatic event, her father’s fatal accident, which she has referred to in conversations about her work. In this series, the artist repeated parts of the basic geometry of each image as a way of assembling the next, so that a stool, for example, called forth a washbasin, ultimately raising questions about memory as a reconstructive procedure capable of not only unfixing but also filling in. The abstract paintings in the exhibition clearly emerged in close relation to the figurative ones, echoing their palette and brushwork. *Snow*, 2016, appeared to continue the logic of increasing abstraction at work in the “*Storm*” series by evoking just the wintry weather, while *Tiger*, 2016, a small-scale painting, could be a detail from *Ghost Town I*. The abstractions not only drew further attention to the artist’s expressive handling of paint but also engaged the viewer in a perceptual play around the tension between visual image and material reality in the work.

Given Moritz’s engagement with the past through the medium of painting, there is of course the question of how her paintings themselves fit into the recent history of art. The exhibition title, “*Dawn*,” with its allusions to beginning again and truth being revealed, resonated both with the work and the conditions of its production; it evoked romantic yearning as well as the daily reality of studio practice. By playing with repetition and difference, painting and reality, Moritz confronts the viewer with uncertainty. She questions whether memory can ever be an unmediated representation of the past.