

WHAT IS MIGHTIER THAN THE BRUSH?

Sofia Mascate on Ariane Mueller at the Secession, Vienna

"Ariane Mueller: Fische sind ins Meer gefaltet wie das Meer in die Fische," Secession, Vienna, 2025



Visual artists today respond to times of war mainly through public statements and debate, political organizing and boycott. By contrast, it seems almost anachronistic that Ariane Mueller decidedly chooses artistic means to address the topic. In her recent solo presentation at the Secession, she pits two different approaches against one another: Critically relating to art history and the modernist belief in art's revolutionary potential, Mueller presents a new series of landscape paintings – inspired by Paul Cézanne – placed in opposition to video works documenting her collaboration with other artists and writers since the 1990s. In her review, Sofia Mascate reconstructs the artist's framing of the exhibition's duality in denoting "war" and "peace" and relates Mueller's position back to the history of the Secession and the circularity of the art market.

In 1903, the Viennese Secession hosted a major exhibition to contextualize and historicize the Impressionist movement.¹ Among works by other canonical artists in the fields of painting and sculpture, it featured the work of Paul Cézanne,

shown for the first time in Austria. The exhibition was part of a shift in the reception of Cézanne's work: At the turn of the century, the artist went from being dismissed as a provincial painter to gaining cult status as the father of modern art, earning Pablo Picasso's deference for paving the way for Cubism.² Today, Cézanne remains a touchstone for artists and art critics alike – a "Cézannioia" still lingers in the air.³

Over a century later, in the exact same venue, Ariane Mueller has staged a pictorial investigation of war and peace informed by both modernist masters. The exhibition "Fische sind ins Meer gefaltet wie das Meer in die Fische" alludes to Picasso's *La Guerre et la Paix* (1952), a diptych installed in the chapel of the Vallauris Castle. The two ten-meter-long wood panels mimic a light-and-shadow play, with silhouettes of warriors and luminous angular figures of women and children facing one another. Mueller separates the Secession's main hall in a similar fashion: On

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the left, colossal landscape paintings in the style of Cézanne's watercolors stand for "war." On the right, "peace" is represented by a constellation of accordion-folded paper screens, onto which 20 videos are projected on a loop.

Picasso's light-and-shadow duality is inverted here: Half of the lighting system, simulating a skylight, has been disabled to cast shade over the video works. Nevertheless, the emulated daylight reflects off every blank space in the exhibition: from the walls to the white canvases' ground, to the paper screens that have been clumsily tacked onto pinewood beams. In the slight shade, high-lumen projectors, adding a frantic whirr, beam silent videos. They span from 1988 to 2023 and show snippets of the extensive collaborative networks the artist was part of in Berlin in the 1990s. Different scenes unfold: May Day protests, a schoolyard tennis match, a solar eclipse, raindrops on an ICE train's window – disparate activities that sprout from having time. These moments feel leisurely yet hint at a stance of political resistance on the part of the participants. Mueller's practice is multifaceted; while her video

works have circulated widely, they are always presented in relation to her broader output and ongoing collaborations.

On the other side of the room, huge portrait-oriented canvases present sparse landscapes in a palette of muted tones: ochres and siennas, violets and greens. They resemble Cézanne's late works of Montagne Sainte-Victoire in brushwork and composition. Yet Mueller has expanded and delivered the brushstrokes in a less inquisitive spirit; they're contained within the confines of a faint pencil sketch. The paintings hang on the wall a couple of centimeters above the floor, creating a sense that this peaceful scene could be entered. An outlier canvas leans against a pillar, revealing the aluminum stretchers and raw linen on its back side.

The exhibition's white areas serve a similar function to those in Cézanne's watercolors: "They are like a silence demanded so that you can hear the echoes."⁴ That silence allows the viewer to unpack how Mueller deals with the topic of war and peace, just as the ground in Cézanne's works holds together a dialectic of perception and

representation of nature in painting.⁵ Next to the entrance, an excerpt of Karl Kraus's 1914 essay "In dieser großen Zeit" is displayed as a wall text with each sentence indexed as the title of each of Mueller's paintings. Published at the onset of the First World War, the essay exposes the systems that manufacture consent and profit from war and points out the role of language and the press's complicity in the fervor of the public discourse at the time. Since narratives around war are manipulative and manipulated, Kraus pleads in his essay that "whoever has something to say now should step forward and remain silent," addressing the impossibility of participating in such rhetoric.⁶ Referencing this critique of the verbal machinery around war is the most literal articulation of the artist's intent in the exhibition space. In the accompanying catalogue, Mueller acknowledges the age-old challenges and contradictions that come with addressing war in art.⁷ Mueller has worked as a UN delegate, publisher, curator, novelist, and editor of the art magazines *Artfan* and *Starship*. These fields allow for other types of engagement with the matter, but she chose to approach the topic through artistic means. In the Secession, Mueller takes a stance somewhere between Cézanne, Picasso, and Kraus and considers how they've each exercised their craft in relation to the political reality of their respective times. While self-aware and skeptical of these efforts, she's not cynical. Even if doubting the efficacy of her (or any) response to war, she follows her chosen path.

This isn't the first time Mueller has turned to art history to explore how to make art in times of military aggression: While preparing her 2023 show at Schiefe Zähne gallery, "7 rue des Grands Augustins," she found herself in Paris as Russia

attacked Ukraine and paid regular visits to the building where Picasso produced *Guernica* (1937). For that exhibition, she rendered the facade of his studio into paintings. Now, she has extended this concept by mimicking Cézanne's late-life behavior and works. At 60 years old, Cézanne retreated to Aix-en-Provence and painted proto-cubist depictions of Montagne Sainte-Victoire in oil and watercolor until his final days. In order to produce her paintings for the Secession, Mueller performed the trope of the artist exiled in nature as she sketched in the Wienerwald and in Styria. She would return to her studio and blow up her sketches into the geometrical language of Cézanne. To paint the floor-to-ceiling canvas, she used a massive brush fixed to a two-meter stick. This technique can be interpreted as an attempt to ward off authorial mark-making and to create a distance from the painter she references. Cézanne's watercolors are modest in scale and were made in nature through direct observation; Mueller subverts this format. But while she aims to remove herself from the act, the process emphasizes her intervention as a painter. According to the artist, all paintings of the series depict *Holzwege*, meaning "wrong paths," suggesting that the action she undertook was erroneous. This claim is not evident in the works, depicting only enmeshed foliage, tree trunks, and water reflections. The question arises: If it is the wrong path to take, why follow it through? To what end?

Mueller uses the formal vocabulary of Cézanne to appropriate the language of the heyday of painting – a code well suited to a venue like the Secession, which attracts tourists drawn to the peak of Jugendstil. Under the assumption that this return to tradition resonates with the institution's core audience, the paintings function



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as an entry point to engage with the video works. There's a tension between this didacticism devised for a broad viewership and how the show is codified for a connoisseur audience through the reference to Picasso's *La Guerre et la Paix*, Kraus's essay, and the painter's painter Cézanne. The circle of those who are familiar with the protagonists of the video works – the contexts in which Mueller was active – is even smaller.

The production aesthetics of the works underscore the gap between public appeal and insider discourse, pointing to the institutional and economic scripts determining which artistic strategies become viable. "War" represents the appeasement related to working in formats that promise market success. "Peace" suggests a not profit-oriented engagement that resists commercial pressure and requires time and space. Both bodies of work, while shaped by different conditions and modes of production, fold back into the conventions and expectations of the art world regardless. Still, Mueller's approach appeals to my sensibilities as an artist who fears the loss of a looser, collaborative, politically engaged spirit in culture – an artist who fears what art might

become in a future of brainless revivals of past prosperity trying to hit the right chord with the market. Mueller's probing of the limits of art and artists feels necessary as worldwide conflicts escalate and fascist politics resurface. Her understanding of peace as a "threat to its own breakdown" mirrors the back-and-forth undercurrents that run through the exhibition.⁸ It evokes a balancing act between interdependent states that fold into each other, just as the fish fold into the sea, and vice versa.

The threat to the delicate conditions of art-making is echoed by the exhibition's historical references, which prompt consideration of the reach of both the art and the artist. Despite his moral faults, Picasso held the belief that "painting is not made to decorate houses" but rather to be "an instrument of offensive and defensive war against the enemy."⁹ Cézanne's works were unpopular during most of his lifetime, the result of a devoted painting practice that didn't fulfill market demands. Still, throughout the exhibition, there's a palpable longing for the modernist hope of a revolution through and within art. This sentiment resonates with the Secession's origin:

It was created in 1897 by a group of dissident artists who, wanting to protest Vienna's artistic nationalism, introduced an exhibition platform for avant-garde international movements. The group's intention was to host exhibitions "freed of commercial interests and organized according to purely artistic standards, so that a pure and modern concept of art can be taught to the broader public."¹⁰ Mueller continues the inquiry of these short-lived efforts, reckoning with their contradictions. Similar to the Secessionists, she aims to engage a broader public through art in a system that reclaims its exclusivity at every chance. Although the exhibition offers no easy solutions, through multiple entry points it prompts a discussion about the role of art and artists in times of conflict and how to represent "war" and "peace" today. While the exhibition bears no mention of the ongoing genocide in Gaza, any visitor confronted with this conceptual framing will be reminded of those horrors and invited to reflect on the question of powerlessness and complicity.

"Ariane Mueller: Fische sind ins Meer gefaltet wie das Meer in die Fische," May 29–August 31, 2025, Secession, Vienna.

Notes

- 1 "The Development of Impressionism in Painting and Sculpture" opened January 17, 1903. It was the 16th exhibition of the Vienna Secession.
- 2 Jon Kear, *Paul Cézanne* (Reaktion Books, 2016), 212.
- 3 T. J. Clark, "At the Courtauld: Symptoms of Cézannoia," *London Review of Books* 32, no. 23 (2010): 17–20.
- 4 John Berger, *The Success and Failure of Picasso* (Penguin Books, 1965), 55.
- 5 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Cézanne's Doubt" (1945), in *Sense and Non-Sense*, trans. Hubert L. Dreyfus and Patricia Allen Dreyfus (Northwestern University Press, 1964).
- 6 "Wer jetzt etwas zu sagen hat, der trete vor und schweige." Karl Krauss, "In dieser großen Zeit," *Die Fackel*, no. 26 (1924): 136.
- 7 Ariane Mueller and Jeanette Pacher, eds., *Ariane Mueller: Fish are folded into the sea just as the sea is folded into fish* (Secession; Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther und Franz König, 2025), 34.
- 8 Mueller and Pacher, *Ariane Mueller: Fish Are Folded into the Sea*, 35.
- 9 Audacious, coming from an artist with inflationary power and a hand akin to Midas's. Pablo Picasso, "Picasso n'est pas officier dans l'armée française," interview by Simon Tery, *Les Lettres Françaises*, March 24, 1945. Translation by the author.
- 10 From the group's resignation letter to the *Genossenschaft der bildenden Künstler Wiens im Künstlerhaus*; see Victoria Charles and Klaus H. Carl, *The Viennese Secession* (Parkstone International, 2011), 90.