

Lifting the Curtain

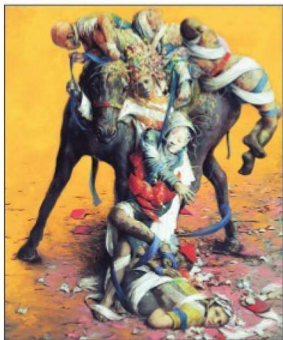
In the strange figures and ghostly settings that feature in his work, Jonas Burgert examines what lies behind the human notion of reality

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"I'M NOT interested in realism," says Jonas Burgert, as he walks us through "Schlier", an exhibition of his works at Galerie Isa in Mumbai. "I believe that the purpose of art is not merely to show us what is there, but to show us what is also there. I'm interested in that subtext," he adds.

Even the most cursory glance at the Berlin-based artist's work shows that reality has varied dimensions and interpretations. In his paintings, one can find shadowy, ominous-looking figures, who, with their knowing eyes and inert bodies, seem to hover in the twilight zone between life and death, sleeping and waking. Somber hues are sharply contrasted by splashes of colour that glow with a radioactive, other-worldly brightness and which seem to flash an unspecified warning at us.

Burgert, who is showing in India for the first time, was born in Berlin and has always



been haunted by existential questions about the meaning of life and death. "My father was an artist and I grew up in a home filled with art. I spent a lot of time with artists, musicians and philosophers who visited our house regularly and the atmosphere definitely influenced the way I think," he says.

Around the age of 16, when he was in the grip of an adolescent need to rebel against his family, Burgert decided that he didn't want to be a painter. That had, however, changed by the age of 21. "I was always looking for answers to these big questions and annoying everyone around me by insisting that we discuss them," he recalls, laughing. "But then I realised that painting is my way of exploring these issues and that's how I became an artist." He eventually graduated from the Academy of Fine Arts in Berlin, and is considered one of the most important figurative painters of his generation in Germany.

Apart from the obvious technical perfection of his works, what strikes viewers is how



(From left) Jonas Burgert's work titled *Klammleicht*; *Lies Feder*; Burgert Picture courtesy: Lepkowski Studios

haunting they are. One might almost describe them as "nightmarish", but the 48-year-old says they shouldn't be seen in a negative light. "When I paint these weird, strange things, I'm doing so in a positive way. There is no violence and horror in my works. I'm being serious in the works and there's nothing negative about seriousness. Some of

the best things in life, like love and friendship, have the same kind of seriousness. We don't laugh when we tell people we love them," he says.

Part of what makes Burgert's works so "serious" is that they hint strongly at the artificiality of our perceptions. "What is real? It's something that people don't want to think



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about, but the question is there in everyone's mind," he says. The exaggerated theatricality of his works, he says, depicts the human instinct for narrative as a way of finding meaning in life. There is, he believes, something staged about how we order our lives so that it fits into the stories that we tell ourselves. This tendency is most strongly manifested in religion, and the many gods that we propitiate through ceremonies. "Early in our history, when we couldn't understand so many natural phenomena, we came up with gods and religions that would help explain these phenomena. We had these elaborate ceremonies, because we felt that through worship we would address questions bigger than ourselves. I find that fascinating," says Burgert. This fascination, perhaps, explains the careful, almost ceremonial arrangement of the tableaux that the artist paints, in which the flowers, toys, shreds of fabric, paper and other junk that are strewn across the landscape surrounding his spectral figures seem like offerings. There is also deliberate timelessness in these works because, Burgert says, our religions and ceremonies may vary, but questions we ask our deepest selves remain the same. "Why do we exist and why do we cease to exist? Life is a phenomenon but our minds are not capable of completely understanding it. And so we make rules that we all agree to follow, because we still have to live this life anyway," he says.

The exhibition is on at Galerie Isa, Kala Ghoda, till April 11