



Xenia Hausner: *Hunderherz (Dog's Heart)*, 1999, acrylic on panel, 74 by 88 inches; at Forum.

Xenia Hausner at Forum

Xenia Hausner's recent, large acrylic-on-canvas portraits consolidate a kind of painted theater of the new, post-Cold War Berlin. That's appropriate, because the Vienna-born artist has lived in Berlin since 1992, when she began to paint full time; before that, she designed more than 100 theater, opera and film productions. Although some critics have compared her work to that of painters such as Otto Dix and Max Beckmann, the most striking resemblance is to Oskar Kokoschka's. Hausner shares his psychological angst as well as an almost licentious use of color and impasto in the "human landscapes" (mostly sited indoors) that she paints.

In an epic-scaled canvas called *Auf Rosen Gebettet* (A Bed of Roses, 1994-99, 66½ by 94½ inches), Hausner's approach to her subjects is compassionate. She offers a high-toned essay on two (perhaps) stage performers behind a bright-red scrim, posed in front of gloriously vivid flowers (or flower paintings). The painting is more expressive than expressionist, despite the pink, yellow and green-mottled skin of the man and woman, seen bust-length, who stare directly out of the canvas. Many questions go unanswered, including who they are, what their relationship is and what the "bed of roses" of the title might be.

In *Hunderherz (Dog's Heart)*, the male model—Hausner chooses her models from among strangers as often as friends—is seen in a green polo-type shirt, plunged into a striped red armchair; the flesh tones are vigorously shot through with greens, the stroke energetically impastoed, as would seem to befit the subject's trim masculinity. What, then, is a large ectoplasmic figure, similar to the model yet discernibly different, possibly female, doing hovering above left in the canvas? There are no easy markers by which to differentiate truth from illusion, theater from life.

The chef d'oeuvre of the exhibition was the near-life-size *Bumbesti*. The background—the side of a small ship, with limp ropes and scuzzy portholes—is a preternatural blend of the illusory with the realistic. Whether the male/female couple sitting before the ship are getting ready to set sail or have just disembarked doesn't really matter. The bodies and faces are loosely, freely, lovingly painted—brought to life to such a degree that they seem to take up the whole canvas. If life really isn't a cabaret, at least Hausner is on hand to point out the workaday beauties of a vast gallery of interesting faces.

—Gerrit Henry