

Press Release

Isa Genzken. Wasserspeier and Angels

Hauser & Wirth London
9 May – 17 July 2024



On view is a revival of Isa Genzken's expansive installation 'Wasserspeier and Angels' (2004), marking 20 years since it was displayed in Genzken's first major solo exhibition in London. Originally responding to Hauser & Wirth's former historic space in Piccadilly in 2004, the re-presentation of Genzken's complex assemblage in the city brings her work into a contemporary context, confronting socio-political themes that are still relevant today. This moment follows on from the acclaimed exhibition 'Isa Genzken: 75/75' at Neue Nationalgalerie in Berlin in 2023, celebrating the artist's 75th birthday with a display of 75 sculptures from her oeuvre from the 1970s to the present.

Genzken explores the relationships between different media and social, political and urban spaces, with references to everyday lived experience intruding on her formal experiments. The first presentation of this work not only marked Genzken's inaugural show with the gallery but also captured a specific moment in time. Working in Berlin and in New York at the turn of the century, the artist witnessed the aftermath of the fall of the Berlin Wall and the subsequent changing landscape of the city, as well as the collapse of the World Trade Center in New York City. In parallel, from the late 1990s on, the artist's sculptural works moved towards assembled installations that borrowed their aesthetic from collages, combining objects with variations in scale. The work on view exemplifies this new artistic language, characterised by its engagement with architectural form and its social dimension. Through the combination of materials sourced for purpose, this multifaceted installation contains layered references and takes on new meaning in today's landscape.

HAUSER & WIRTH



About the exhibition

The installation's starting point came from the artist's fascination with the 'Wasserspeier' (gargoyles) on Cologne Cathedral, encountering their restoration in the building's masonry shop. Having tried to convince the cathedral's master builder to let her take the carvings to London, the artist instead created her own gargoyles for the exhibition in 2004, setting them in dialogue with winged, angelic figures. The duality between the earthbound and the heavenly has permeated Genzken's career, reflected in her formal vocabulary through materials associated with engineering and heaviness, such as electric cables, aluminum panels and trollies, in addition to objects evoking the sky, light and wind, from blue sheets to bright lamps and umbrellas.

Historically, carved gargoyles were provisions for preservation, designed to direct rainwater away from the building, as well as for protection, banishing demons by holding up a mirror to evil. Bringing them from the roof to eye level, Genzken's gargoyles, instead, confront viewers and humanity at large. In the same way that some gargoyles depict a hybrid of animals with human features, the artist imparts an anthropomorphic quality to her figures by giving them heads and body-like frames. Two figures even wear Genzken's own clothing, a jacket and cap, lending the work an autobiographical undertone whilst also offering a reminder of civilisation.

The four 'Wasserspeier' on trollies appear to skate on the aluminium floor, which brings to mind the Chrysler Building's metal cladding. The shiny material also enables the work to interact with the world around it, both literally through reflections and metaphorically by speaking to geopolitics; as such, the work and the surroundings become one. 'In an effort not to represent the world but to be part of it—in other words, to be modern—Genzken chose as her raw materials the cheap, shiny, and ubiquitous building blocks of the contemporary urban environment [...]. Working with these real-world materials, she created installations that engaged with the everyday in substance as well as in subject,' remarks Laura Hoptman, co-curator of 'Isa Genzken: Retrospective' (2013 – 2014) at MoMA, New York.

Totemic columns and pedestals recur throughout Genzken's work and are seen here cloaked in blue plastic that alludes to the wings of angels and is reminiscent of the way in which gowns are draped in Leonardo da Vinci's drawings. Other objects, such as the sacrificial lamb or twigs and broken umbrellas, evoking the power of wind and nature, allow the viewer to relate to the work's inherently human qualities of fragility and vulnerability, setting Genzken apart from her minimalist predecessors who pursued notions of order and power in their work. The artist's interplay of objects conjures a place that is free and ethereal whilst making viewers aware of the restrictions and limitations of the real world.

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About the Artist

Isa Genzken has long been considered one of Germany's most important and influential contemporary artists. Born in Bad Oldesloe, Germany, Genzken studied at the renowned Kunstakademie Düsseldorf, whose faculty at the time included Joseph Beuys, Bernd and Hilla Becher, Benjamin H.D. Buchloh and Gerhard Richter. Since the 1970s, Genzken's diverse practice has encompassed sculpture, photography, found-object installation, film, drawing and painting. Her work borrows from the aesthetics of minimalism, punk culture and assemblage art to confront the conditions of human experience in contemporary society and the uneasy social climate of capitalism. Genzken is best known for her sculptures, gaining attention for her minimalist oriented Hyperbolos and Ellipsoids in the late 70s, and architecturally-inflected works such as her recent epoxy resin windows and skyscraper Columns from the 90s. Genzken's practice is incredibly wide-ranging, but her work remains dedicated to challenging the viewer's self-awareness by means of physically altering their perceptions, bringing bodies together in spaces and integrating elements of a mixed media into sculpture.

Inspired by the stark severity of modernist architecture and the chaotic energy of the city, Genzken's work is continuously looking around itself, translating into three-dimensional form the way that art, architecture, design and media affects the experience of urban life, and the divides between public and private. There is an intuitive and consistent manner to Genzken's work, not only in dramatising aspects of space and scale for the audience, but in creating new dialogues and contact with surfaces of material. The socio-political content is evident and central to her oeuvre.

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Gallery hours:

Tuesday to Saturday
10 am – 6 pm

www.hauserwirth.com

Caption and courtesy:

All images:

Isa Genzken
Wasserspeier and Angels
2004
Mixed media installation on 42 aluminium panels;
18 parts
Dimensions variable

Installation view, Isa Genzken, 'Wasserspeier and Angels' (detail), 2004, Art Basel Unlimited, Switzerland, 2016. © Isa Genzken. All Rights Reserved, DACS 2024. Courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth. Photo: Stefan Altenburger Photography Zürich

Installation view, 'Isa Genzken. Wasserspeier and Angels' at Hauser & Wirth Piccadilly, London, UK, 2004. © Isa Genzken. All Rights Reserved, DACS 2024. Courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth

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