

HAUSER & WIRTH
INVITE(S) **URBAN**
ZELLWEGER 9 MAY –
23 MAY

WITH A
TEXT BY ELEONORA BITTERLI

IN COLLABORATION
WITH **KARMA**

INTERNATIONAL
& GALERIE
OSKAR WEISS

Hauser & Wirth Invite(s) is a new initiative for hosting fellow artists, galleries and writers, offering wider visibility of their work and ideas and engaging with the city's vibrant creative community.

This new initiative reflects Hauser & Wirth's longstanding commitment to building a sense of connection in the places where it works, collaborating with artists (or estates) who may benefit from an additional platform, galleries of different scale and writers addressing new audiences, all in support of a sustainable art ecosystem. By hosting fellow artists, galleries and writers, we offer wider visibility of their work and ideas to engage with each city's vibrant creative community.

Organized with Olivier Renaud-Clément, Hauser & Wirth Invite(s) launched in Paris in February 2025. The project now comes to Zurich for the first time, where it is hosted on the lower level of our Limmatstrasse gallery and complements our ongoing series of exhibitions by gallery artists on the upper floors.



Urban Zellweger in his studio. Photo: Flavio Karrer



Urban Zellweger, New Note, 2024. Photo: Flavio Karrer



Urban Zellweger, Outbreak VI, 2025. Photo: Flavio Karrer

ABOUT THE EXHIBITION

The first Zurich iteration of Invite(s) features a solo exhibition by Swiss artist Urban Zellweger, presented in collaboration with his Zurich galleries Karma International and Galerie Oskar Weiss. A new text by Eleonora Bitterli accompanies the exhibition. On view through 23 May, the presentation continues the spirit of Invite(s) by creating an open framework for exchange, experimentation and visibility within Hauser & Wirth's Zurich location.

‘For a long time, I went to bed early. Sometimes, my candle scarcely out, my eyes would close so quickly that I did not have time to say to myself: ‘I’m falling asleep.’ And, half an hour later, the thought that it was time to try to sleep would wake me; I wanted to put down the book I thought I still had in my hands and blow out my light; I had not ceased while sleeping to form reflections on what I had just read, but these reflections had taken a rather peculiar turn; it seemed to me that I myself was what the book was talking about’.¹

This fleeting moment between wakefulness and sleep — when consciousness begins to blur, outlines dissolve, and thoughts detach from reality to take on a life of their own — marks the opening of Proust’s ‘Recherche,’ published in seven volumes between 1913 and 1927. Thoughts stretch, the body comes to a standstill, and only the imagination continues. Sleep appears as a force that overrides intention — an invisible ‘flattening-force’ (‘force ’aplatissement’), as Gilles Deleuze called it in his lectures on painting.² In Urban Zellweger’s ‘New Note’ (2024) and ‘Table de tennis’ (2018), this suspension becomes visible: the figures succumb mid-motion; caught in play and in focus.

But not everything stops; the narrative shifts. Zellweger pushes the sleeper off-center, opening up a second, latent storyline. Historically, sleeping figures often appear at the margins of images, as if stationed at the threshold of the dream world. They are both dreamers and witnesses, mediators of altered states. The body becomes a transmitter of internal images: unknowable, self-governing, shaped only by memory and cultural residue. Zellweger’s forms, which range from cryptic to completely abstract, drift like thought bubbles or dissolve into diffuse zones that merge with their surroundings.

They point to an unruly interior terrain that resists translation and eludes the grasp of language.

In his abstract passages, Zellweger courts contingency. Painting, he tells me, is sometimes like a game — and when the game gets boring, you make up a new rule. His drawing ‘Snakes and Ladders’ (2019) explicitly refers to a game. Originating in medieval India, ‘Snakes and Ladders’ was originally imbued with moral and religious symbolism: virtue led upwards, vice downwards. In the late 19th century, the board game was colonially adapted by the British, simplified into a model of fate and coincidence.³ In Zellweger’s version, a green shoe climbs a ladder. The snake itself is absent, while the poison-like color and the shoe’s possible snakeskin texture linger, referring less to an animal than to a deeply anchored symbol within the collective imaginary.

These visual residues and stereotypes interest Zellweger, but they also represent the central challenge of a painter: to overcome the cliché. ‘There is no blank canvas,’ says Deleuze, meaning that the field is saturated with norms, images and assumptions even before the first brushstroke.⁴ The figure in ‘New Note,’ dozing over the blank page, seems momentarily to escape this burden. Yet the challenge of confronting the cliché persists in ‘Stand out’ (2025), where a chameleon perches on a branch, its tongue extended toward the frame, as if testing the limits of the image itself. In Western iconography, the chameleon is frequently associated with adaptability, disguise, and duplicity, serving as an emblem of opportunism and neoliberal ideology. Zellweger, however, subverts this symbolic charge. As in nature, the animal’s chromatic shifts correspond to internal states — stress, excitement, alertness — rather than environmental camouflage.

This chameleon does not conceal itself; it communicates. Its mode of visual expression is strikingly immediate and echoes the operations of painting itself.

An early and radical model for such reflexive strategies in painting is Cornelis Norbertus Gijsbrechts' 'Reverse of a Framed Painting' (1670), a hyperreal depiction of a canvas's back, including nails, shadows and the frame, rendered with trompe-l'œil precision. It shows 'nothing,' and yet everything: a painting about painting, reduced to its backside. The art historian Victor I. Stoichita calls this a founding gesture of meta-painting — a looped reflection on the image and its terms.⁵ Zellweger's own 'reverse' takes up this tradition, but not through illusion. 'Untitled (verso)' (2025) does not seek to fool the viewer or display technical prowess. Instead, it functions as a conceptual trick, referencing Gijsbrechts through irony, historical awareness and a contemporary perspective.

In his work, Zellweger exposes its mechanics without collapsing into narrative or discourse, revealing the painter's capacity, in Deleuze's terms, to evade clichés, to render forces visible, and to unlock the potential therein. The power lies not in what is depicted, but in what is activated. The inevitable distance between idea and form always produces a kind of irritation, and in recognizing this distortion, the painter's potential emerges. His abstract forms, like the gridded, caged geometries in 'Outbreak IV' (2022) and 'Outbreak VI' (2025), attempt to represent something that cannot be found elsewhere. What happens in the between — after nodding off, before waking disoriented? Proust writes that the sleeper 'holds in a circle around him the sequence of the hours, the order of the years and worlds'.⁶ This circular time may be inaccessible, but the trick, the

moment of in-between, allows brief access. Not to transcendence, but to something embedded, already present. Between sleep and action, figuration and field, reference and abstraction, Zellweger's works generate zones of oscillation. They move. His paintings don't declare but ask; don't resolve but unfold. They are non-illusionistic, non-discursive, non-didactic. Not in search of clarity, they open a space for perception—without rules, without tropes. A visual language, perhaps, for living with contradiction, or, for navigating the absurd.

—Eleonora Bitterli

(translated from German)

- 1 Marcel Proust, 'In Search of Lost Time,' trans. Lydia Davis, Vol. 1: Swann's Way (New York: Penguin Classics, 2002), p. 3. First published 1913.
- 2 Gilles Deleuze, 'Sur la peinture. Cours, mars–juin 1981,' ed. Anne Sauvagnargues (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2023), p. 78. Lectures held in 1981.
- 3 For a historical overview of 'Snakes and Ladders,' see Andrew Topsfield, 'The Indian Game of Snakes and Ladders,' *Artibus Asiae* 4, no. 3 (1985): 203–226.
- 4 See Gilles Deleuze, 'Sur la peinture' (2023), p. 43.
- 5 Victor I. Stoichita, 'The Self-Aware Image: An Insight into Early Modern Meta-Painting,' trans. Anne-Marie Glasheen (London/Turnhout: Harvey Miller Publishers, 1997), p. 291. First published 1993.
- 6 Marcel Proust, 'In Search of Lost Time,' Vol. 1: Swann's Way, p. 5. First published 1913.



Urban Zellweger in his studio. Photo: Flavio Karrer



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ABOUT URBAN ZELLWEGER

In his work, Urban Zellweger deals with the transitions between figurative and abstract elements. Bodies and figures combine, merge into one another, are painted over, or dissolve into the background. While mundane events and biographical occurrences inform Zellweger's visual lexicon, they are hardly recognizable as such. Normality is distorted with surreal wit, and yet everything appears perfectly calm.

Urban Zellweger has exhibited at the Bechtler Foundation, Uster; CAN Neuchâtel; Kunstverein Nürnberg; Istituto Svizzero, Milan; Belgrade Biennale; LUMA Foundation, Zurich; Astrup Fearnley, Oslo; Plymouth Rock, Zurich; and Shoot the Lobster, New York, among others.



Urban Zellweger, Outbreak VI (detail), 2025. Photo: Flavio Karrer

ABOUT KARMA INTERNATIONAL

Karma International was founded by Marina Olsen and Karolina Dankow, who opened their first space in 2009 in Zurich. The gallery started its initial program with artists from their own generation—such as Pamela Rosenkranz, Ida Ekblad and David Hominal, among others—who have been crucial in defining the gallery's identity. Over the past decade, the program has expanded to include artists from various generations, including Meret Oppenheim, Ser Serpas, Vivian Suter, Sylvie Fleury, Małgorzata Mirga-Tas, Judith Bernstein, Urban Zellweger, Jasmine Gregory, VALIE EXPORT and Simone Fattal.

From 2015 to 2020, Karma International operated a second space in Los Angeles. The dialogue between Europe and the United States brought a new quality to the program, allowing for experimentation with an ongoing, parallel exhibition program. In 2020, the gallery opened a second space in Zurich, located across from the main gallery, which serves as an extended local platform for artists from its roster.

ABOUT GALERIE OSKAR WEISS

After running Weiss Falk for nine years, Oskar Weiss founded Galerie Oskar Weiss in 2025 in Zurich, resuming all collaborations and representations from the former program. The gallery currently represents 13 national and international artists and two estates. It organizes five to seven exhibitions a year and publishes books under its own publishing house, Hacienda Books.

ABOUT ELEONORA BITTERLI

Eleonora Bitterli is a Zurich-based art historian specializing in modern and contemporary art. She works as a research associate at the Kunstmuseum Luzern and independently as a curator and writer on international projects, including collaborations with Café des Glaces in Tonnerre, the Tsinghua Art Museum in Beijing and the Fumetto Comic Festival in Lucerne. She is the co-founder of the off-space Sweet Tooth in Zurich and a member of the curatorial team of Plattform, the annual exhibition for emerging artists in Switzerland.



Urban Zellweger's studio. Photo: Flavio Karrer

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