ART

Between Order and Chaos: A Conversation with David Gunderlach



Photo: David Gunderlach, ohne Titel

This month, we had the chance to speak with David Gunderlach. The German artist, born in 1957, tries to understand the world by embracing its chaos, while also finding order and peace in it. His art operates without boundaries: Berlin, Tibet and New York shaped his view of the world and continue to do so, opening the dialogue with psychotherapy, politics and spirituality. Gunderlach will be present at Discovery Art Fair in Frankfurt at the end of October, a chance to see his work in person and immerse yourself in his vision.

Beatrice Sacco

Read the original article at thecolumbist.com

Interview reproduced from the supplied text. Layout adapted for print.

— Your works are often described as dense and chaotic. Do you feel your painting is a way to bring some sort of order to the chaos of reality, or is it rather a key to interpreting and reading it?

— I don’t think I paint to tidy up the world. I try to work through what moves me, angers me or leaves me puzzled. Interestingly, painting itself calms me down, even though my pictures can be quite restless. New York played a decisive role in shaping my visual language. In the eighties, everything came together there for me: graffiti, music, art, a zest for life, but also poverty, violence and AIDS. I immediately fell in love with the city.

Warhol, Basquiat and Roy Lichtenstein were important points of reference. With Warhol, I am interested in his perspective on the imagery of consumer culture and the media. I shared with Roy Lichtenstein the relationship between comics, language and emotion. With Basquiat, I am moved by the immediate energy of drawing, lettering and colour. These influences meet my own experiences in my work. The sketch-like quality, the apparent immediacy, the fleeting gesture, the seemingly hurried notation: expressions of lived experience. That is how my paintings emerge. Humour and unease, vitality and threat all have a place at the same time. If that is chaos, then yes, my paintings are chaotic too.

— You often incorporate text and sentences into your pieces. What is their origin? Do you pick them up from daily life and things you read, or are they personal thoughts that emerge during the creative process?

— Sometimes a sentence stays with me; sometimes it only emerges while I am painting. I am interested in phrases that trigger a response and whose meaning changes through the image. In “Mom Knows It Better,” a child essentially says: “Mom, you told me this world is a wonderful place.” What do we tell children about life? And how does that fit with the world we leave them? In “Feed Me I Am Hungry,” one figure wants to philosophize, to talk about goodness for everyone. The other would rather have a burger. For me, that contains a very human truth: we have high ideals, yet we are also driven by our immediate needs. I include myself in that. The connection with comics plays a part here. A few lines and a speech bubble can bring an entire situation to life.



Photo: David Gunderlach, ohne Titel

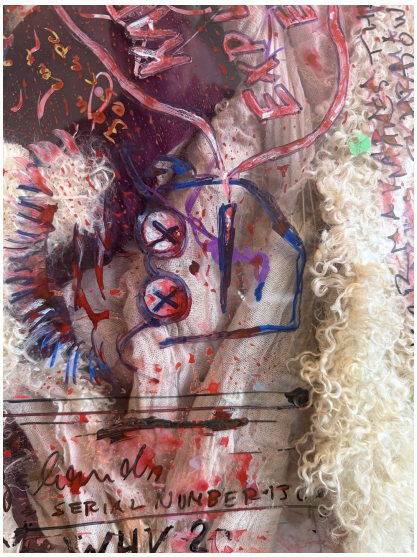

Photo: David Gunderlach,
Buddhisneyworld, 2026



Photo: David Gunderlach, Last exit

— You developed a very specific technique that you continue to use, the layering of transparent plastic sheets. How did you arrive at this choice, and what does it allow you to express compared to other mediums?

— I discovered industrial plastic film in 1985, before my time in New York. Its transparency immediately fascinated me. I could paint on both sides and see the person opposite me through the film. This led to life-size portraits and performances. People stood directly behind the stretched film while I painted them. Only this material separated us. There was closeness, physical contact and a non-verbal exchange. For me, it was a completely different experience of portraiture. I carried out these performances with Paul Maenz in Cologne, among others, and later in New York galleries, including Leo Castelli’s.

At the same time, I developed my approach to working with two layers of film. I stretch film across the back of the stretcher frame and work on both sides. Then I stretch another layer across the front and work on that. This gives me three surfaces to work on, with a space between them where I can also incorporate objects. These spatial layers allow me to interweave figures, colour and text. You look at the painting and into it at the same time.

— Your connection to Tibet and Buddhism is central to your poetics, as seen in your exploration of concepts like the "Monkey Mind". How did this spiritual and artistic journey begin for you?

— I am interested in how we live with our own minds. That connects my artistic work with my work as a psychotherapist. “Monkey Mind” describes something I know well: thoughts jump back and forth, while memories, worries and desires all push to the forefront at once. That movement has an affinity with my paintings. Through painting, I can bring it outside myself and look at it. That also gives me a sense of calm. What particularly interests me in Buddhist thought is exploring my own mind, developing compassion, recognizing impermanence and examining how we deal with suffering.

These questions become very concrete in everyday life: How do I respond to others, to our world? What am I holding on to? How do I deal with my own contradictions? In my engagement with Tibet with political questions of power, cultural identity and self-determination I give space to the hope for good governance. China bears responsibility here. In my view, this nation will profoundly change and shape our world in the coming decades. My paintings emerge from experience, often also from doubt, anger or a decidedly down-to-earth sense of the absurd.



Photo: David Gunderlach

— At the upcoming Discovery Art Fair in Frankfurt, you will showcase your new series Good Governance | Tibet und das Chaos der Gegenwart. Could you tell us more about this project and how it dialogues with the complexity of our present times?

— My work has always engaged with the political and social realities of its time. In the eighties, these included military conflicts such as the Iran-Iraq War, the arms race, AIDS, violence and gender relations. Later, I explored the fall of the Berlin Wall and the pandemic. Today, other conflicts and power interests occupy me. In the current group of works, Tibet provides a concrete starting point for broader questions: How is power exercised? What does responsible leadership mean? What happens to people and their culture when others determine their future?

I explore these questions through painting. I am interested in the tension that arises when a painting initially reads as a field of color from a distance, then becomes uncomfortable on closer inspection. I cannot resolve political conflicts with a painting. But I can make my position visible, sharpen questions and perhaps encourage someone to look a little longer.



Photo: David Gunderlach, This world needs more than a smile

— You have recently focused on limited editions. What do you think of collecting art today, and how does this connect to a political vision of making art affordable and accessible to everyone?

— I would like more people to be able to live with art. Collecting can begin with a single work that speaks to you. “Mom Knows It Better” launches my ongoing collector’s series GOOD GOVERNANCE: acrylic reproductions measuring 20 × 20 centimetres, signed and numbered, each limited to 50 copies. In this way, a collection with a personal sense of continuity can gradually develop. The editions offer a less expensive entry point than the originals.

“Affordable for everyone” would promise too much, though. What interests me most about collecting is the relationship that grows over time. A painting also says something about its owner. It can be a statement and in that sense, I see the GOOD GOVERNANCE series as a statement! A work hangs in your home, becomes familiar, perhaps invites conversation, and eventually catches your eye in a completely different way. You might only discover a joke later. Or a sentence suddenly takes on a new meaning through an experience of your own.



Photo: David Gunderlach, Buddhisneyworld, 2026

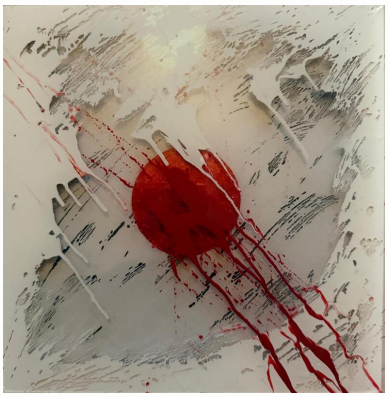

Photo: David Gunderlach, Unsolved



Photo: David Gunderlach, Goldens stars



Photo: David Gunderlach, Mom knows it better