

**Press release**

**Thomas Schütte**

25.02.2022 – 23.04.2022

Opening: Thursday, 24 February 2022, 6–9 pm

carlier | gebauer, Madrid, is pleased to announce an exhibition of Thomas Schütte's new heads. With five ceramics from the series *Old Friends Revisited* and a large *Frauenkopf* (Woman's Head) as well as the portfolio *Old Friends Revisited – 12 Scenes*, consisting of inkjet pigment prints, the exhibition showcases a cycle of works that has held the sculptor's creative attention for thirty years.

Schütte stages the grotesque presences of *Old Friends Revisited*, by endowing the classic portrait bust with ludicrous shaping of the facial features and gaudily coloured, reflecting glazes. The "old friends" first made their appearance in the form of figures with more or less fist-sized heads in the year 1992 when Schütte held a residential scholarship in the Villa Massimo in Rome and legal investigations were revealing hitherto inconceivable ties between the worlds of politics and organized crime. Continuously, the artist recalls, "these shifty, crooked faces" were present in the media. The boundless political and moral corruption seems to have served Schütte as a stimulus and justification for abandoning the marriage of the human face to natural forms, as firmly inscribed by art history, in favour of figurative excesses. It is not as if the *Old Friends* were bestowing a face on moral degeneracy and turpitude: quite the reverse, Schütte's heads display the impossibility of giving visual form to wickedness and criminal wrong-doing. Elaborately modelled physiognomies proclaim their disjunction from the meanings they lead one to expect. What such severance from conventional ties makes possible – as if it were a new beginning – is a contagious delight in formal inventions. Together with the return to tried and tested models of sculptural embodiment from earlier years, the semiological break seems to enable Schütte to expand extraordinarily the aesthetic potential of his art. This transgression of limits finds expression especially in the experimental, unusually rich and gleaming surfaces of the sculptures, produced by the rule-contra-vening overlaying of two different glazes and the correspondingly unforeseeable material effects. The intrusion into the world of images of faces that are simultaneously repulsive and aesthetically lavish is given genealogical validation by an ancestral gallery of "old friends" – large-format, inkjet-printed photographs of small heads made of coloured modelling compound.

Schütte confronts and contrasts the hideous faces of the *Old Friends Revisited* with a female head. "I thought," he remarks, "that it was time to make completely still figures, their eyes lowered, really beautiful things". The tranquil face of the self-absorbed figure is a further character from Schütte's puppet theatre. It stands for loveliness and inwardness and is thus just as much a formulaic construct as the "old friends". As with the "old friends", however, the remoteness of the woman's head from any foreknowable meaning creates options for a surplus of aesthetic invention. This surplus is a translation of the modern crisis of representation. It lays claim to the improbable possibility of giving, through its wealth of sensuousness, an idea of what can no longer be said or shown.

Thomas Schütte has been participating in exhibitions at carlier | gebauer since 1995 but is now presenting his first monographic show in the Madrid gallery. In 2010, he held a wide-ranging retrospective in the Museo Reina Sofia.

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