ARTFORUM

Robert Russell: Reclaiming the monstrous kitsch of Dachau
As told to Juliana Halpert
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Robert Russell, *Liegendes Reh*, 2023, oil on canvas, 40 x 55".

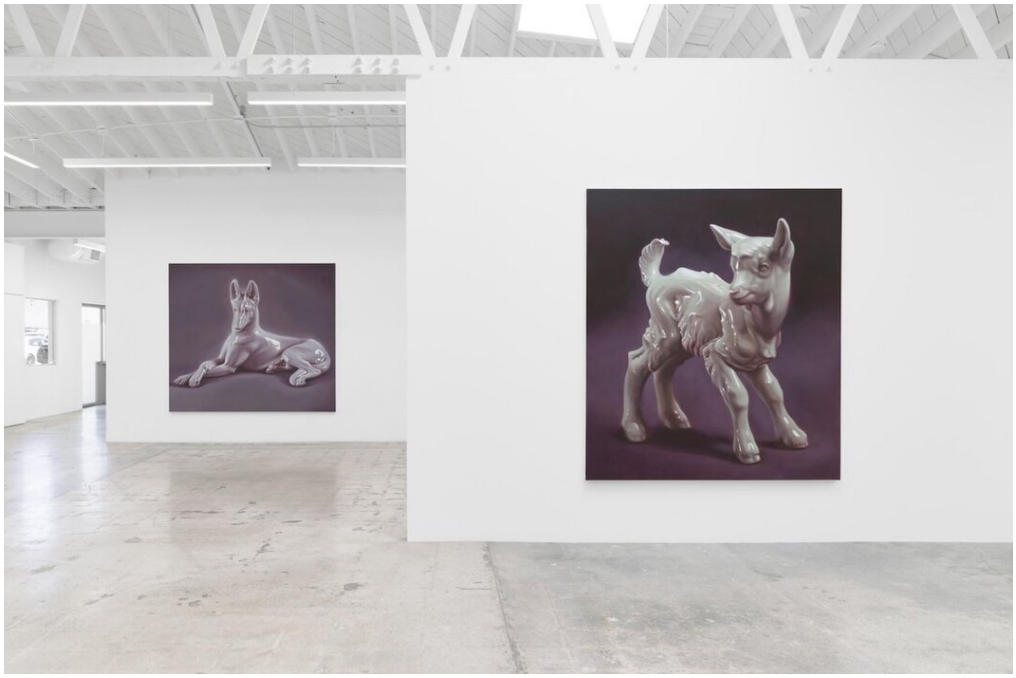
At first glance, "Porzellan Manufaktur Allach," Robert Russell's current solo exhibition at Anat Ebgi Gallery in Los Angeles (on through April 22), is a close study of cuteness. But after spending more time with his large, auratic paintings of porcelain animals—and learning their backstory—the glossy fawns, bunnies, lambs, and puppies reveal a dark underbelly. All of these objets d'art were made during the Nazi regime by forced laborers in the Dachau concentration camp. Heinrich Himmler, among the principal architects of the Holocaust, oversaw their production, calling porcelain "one of the few things that give me pleasure." Russell does not rid the figurines of their shiny, saccharine charm, but under his gaze, they take on new life. Transposed from a miniature scale to a monumental one, and from porcelain into paint, these subjects are alchemized from kitsch into art, like golems shaped from the clay of their dark history.

DURING THE PANDEMIC, I completed a series of paintings of porcelain teacups based on images that I had found on eBay, posted by people selling their grandparents' wares, et cetera. That project prompted me to do more research on porcelain. Separately, I had been doing a lot of reading on the Holocaust. Sure enough, the story of porcelain suddenly dovetailed with Nazi history.

Most of the teacups I had been painting were made at a factory in Meissen, Germany, near Dresden. It's the oldest still-operating manufacturer of porcelain in the world. I saw a photograph of Heinrich Himmler—the top commander of the Nazi *Schutzstaffel*, who oversaw all of its genocide programs, including the concentration camps—visiting the Meissen factory in 1933. Himmler was obsessed with German folklore and Aryan mysticism, and apparently he commissioned the factory to start producing figurines. The SS administration would award these porcelain trinkets to their soldiers and officers on special occasions. Little vignettes, Fragonard-y tableaux, woodland creatures, idyllic peasant figures in lederhosen, stuff like that.

In 1936, Himmler took Third Reich funds to purchase a porcelain factory in Allach, a small town near Munich. Allach Porcelain enlisted top porcelain artists, and its output grew pretty rapidly. When the production outgrew that factory, Himmler moved the company to a larger facility near the Dachau concentration camp and used the prisoners as laborers for almost a decade. That's when the story just gets out of control, as far as I'm concerned. It's just absolutely outrageous.

The Nazi Party was a very aesthetic movement. They were extremely attentive to graphic design, architecture, and crafting a lexicon of symbols and motifs to support their ideology. Porcelain was well-suited to the Nazi ethos, because it's all about purity and whiteness. They weren't interested in anything avant-garde; their entire horrific project was about looking back to some mythic past. They were waging an enormous mechanized war while fantasizing about *Lebensraum*—"living space"—turning all of Europe into German countryside. I imagine that's why Allach was making so many pastoral and forest animal figurines.



View of "Porzellan Manufaktur Allach, 2023, Anat Ebgi, Los Angeles

All of the images I used as sources for my paintings are from European war memorabilia auction websites. These auction houses are a far cry from Sotheby's or Christie's and have long, German names. The figurines are very, very expensive: like twenty to thirty thousand bucks. I wanted to acquire one just to handle it, to see what its physical presence was like. But I didn't want to spend the money—nor could I—and I really don't want to participate in that marketplace. I've consequently never seen one of these Allach porcelain figures in person. One of the ways that I'm thinking about these paintings is that I'm turning these figurines into Jewish objects. As a Jew who is engaging with this history and responding to it, I consider these paintings Jewish artworks. I like to imagine that, if someone were to research Allach porcelain now, they would encounter my work. I want to embed myself in the story and make it one of Jewish reclamation.

We think of porcelain as being bone-white, but in actuality, these glossy figurines absorb whatever colors are around them. Most of them were photographed against a neutral gray backdrop to avoid any coloration. But I didn't want the paintings to look like they were stuck in the World War Two era, like distant historical artifacts. The figurines still exist, and I thought they should appear more ethereal, like ghosts. I used lots of alizarin crimson, a color that has been an obsession of mine for a long time. It has incredible range—you can pull so many deep and light hues out of its pigment. It's also very bodily. When you squeeze the paint out of the tube, it looks like deep red blood. But it's essentially pink, and I took some delight in painting Nazi artifacts as these apparitions in pink and Prussian blue.

Scale was crucial. The objects are just a few inches tall, but these paintings needed to be much larger than life. They need to scream their cuteness at you. Somehow that cuteness brings their brutality to the fore. They slowly transform into the monsters they really are. I needed that horror to be a physical experience for the viewer, rather than strictly an intellectual one. It's one thing to learn the history, but entirely another to feel it on a deeper level, beyond what words can express.