

# Tanya Leighton

The Interview  
*by Ross Simonini*

## Jonas Lipps

“Some of it will stay in my head, under the radar, connecting to other stuff coming by, doing its work, and years later I will suddenly have understood it”

A Jonas Lipps exhibition is a modest and casual affair: small unframed, untitled works on paper, pinned directly to the wall in a nice, even row. It's a nonprecious presentation that would equally suit the local kindergarten. Beyond this superficial description, however, the forty-year-old Freiburg-born artist's works vary in almost every way: medium, technique, content, attitude. Some are painted on ragged found surfaces – an old pizza box, a crushed Styrofoam cup – while others are crisp and pristine, fashioned with meticulous detail.

Many suggest expressionist cartoons or watercolour illustrations of familiar scenes (eg a queue at a cinema), but some push against these tendencies with chunky collage, hard-edged formalism and, occasionally, full-blown abstraction. All in all, it's an exploded compilation of the last hundred years of painting.

The work resists generalisation, and so asks the viewer to step closer and witness the gentle touch of Lipps's brush, or the quiet humour percolating behind the images. The refusal of a cohesive style also implies

an artist uninterested in forming a consistent persona. Likewise, Lipps has given few interviews, and photos of him are hard to find. For the following exchange, I corresponded with the artist over email. It was late summer, a time of vacation for Lipps and his family. As we wrote, he travelled from his home in Berlin to Burgundy to Athens to the island of Hydra. Like his paintings, his answers were brief and unexpected, filled with an abundance of personality but countered by a strict refusal of indulgence.

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*Jonas Lipps, 2018 (installation view, Halle für Kunst, Lüneburg).*  
Courtesy the artist; Halle für Kunst, Lüneburg; and Tanya Leighton, Berlin

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## The most superior artform

ROSS SIMONINI *Why are you in Burgundy right now?*

JONAS LIPPS Summer escape. I visited the Gallican site of Bibracte, wanted to look at the Romanesque sculptures of Gislebertus but took bike rides instead. Every evening, at 8.50pm prompt, a dormouse came out of its nesthole over the terrace door.

RS *Do you often take vacations?*

JL No.

RS *Do you enjoy not working?*

JL In the beginning it makes me fairly nervous, but after some practice it can be pleasant.

RS *Does not working ever help your art?*

JL No.

RS *What do you read when you're not working?*

JL All sorts of literature except poetry. I particularly like reading psychoanalytical theory, which often I don't understand or forget immediately.

RS *Why not poetry?*

JL As a kid I got paid to recite poems by heart, but that didn't entice me. I seem to lack a certain sensitivity that is needed to appreciate it.

RS *A sensitivity to language?*

JL There is just too much going on in poems, too hectic for me. I don't touch it. But I am sure it's the most superior artform.

RS *Where does painting sit in this hierarchy of artforms?*

JL Top to bottom: poetry—prose—painting—film—sculpture—pantomime—conceptual art. Music has its own place.

RS *What kind of relationship do you have with music?*

JL It has become a quite nostalgic one.

RS *What music hits your nostalgia button?*

JL Sorry, nostalgic was the utterly wrong term. I am babbling. I love music but really have nothing to say about it. Music is the best thing.

RS *You said you read things you don't understand. What do you get out of that?*

JL I don't understand it, I read it again, still all Greek to me. But some of it will stay in my head,

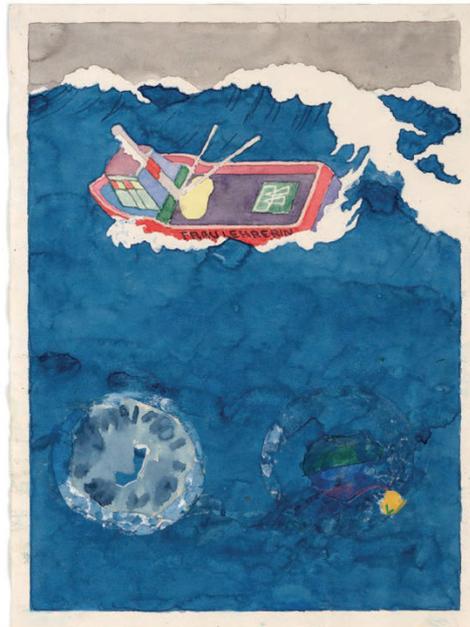
under the radar, connecting to other stuff coming by, doing its work, and years later I will suddenly have understood it.

RS *What's the last thing you read that had a significant effect on you?*

JL I read the 'Little Hans' [1909] case study by Freud, for the second time. How Hans plays around with turds, horses, boxes and a crumpled-up giraffe impresses me, and I like the way he talks.

RS *Does reading ever directly inform your images?*

JL Sometimes they are mere illustrations of text. Fictional book covers. Or representations of biblical scenes, such as Abraham about to slay his son.



RS *Do you usually think of a narrative and then depict it? Or do the images arise more unconsciously?*

JL Often I start with the former and almost always I end up with the latter.

## A walking contradiction

RS *Do you resist titling your work? Or is the work just unsuited to titles?*

JL Sometimes I do think up titles, the good thing is I don't use them. They are always really pretentious, like an embarrassing hat. But I was

able to title the few sculptures I have made. They seem to be more robust against this treatment. The same applies to photographs.

RS *Do you generally dislike titles for other people's art?*

JL No, some people are good and competent titlers.

RS *What's a good title?*

JL *Wrong Thought* by [American sculptor] Matt Hoyt.

RS *What does a title do to an image?*

JL For example, it frames an image or puts it in its place or explains or illuminates it or christens it or claims the artist's control over it or makes an assertion about the artist's attitude towards it, etc. I find it more interesting, or rather it is more possible for me, to try to let an image do this to another image.

RS *Does this dictate how you curate the works in your shows?*

JL Yes, of course, among other dictates, like good form and public decency.

RS *Do you forgo physical frames for a similar reason?*

JL It amplifies the interactions between the images, at least that's what I like to think. When I have finally decided which works will be in a show it's usually too late to call the framer anyway.

RS *In place of titles, you use dates. What does this do to the image?*

JL It's just a half-useful ordering system. They might as well be numbered consecutively. The dates are not even real.

RS *So you don't intend the dates to point back to your life?*

JL No I don't.

RS *The dating makes the work feel like an ongoing journal.*

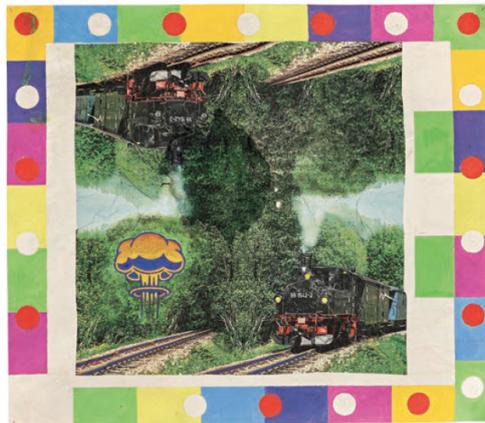
JL Some works are documentary. Favourite holiday adventures or a removal or crying on the toilet. Personal experience is rich material. I would be stupid not to exploit it.

RS *You work with so many different surfaces. Do you do this to encourage different kinds of pictures?*

JL To be surprised and less in control.

RS *Because you dislike control?*

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*facing page* *Untitled*, 2018, casein paint, watercolour, pencil and collage on paper, 34 × 26 cm. Courtesy the artist and Tanya Leighton, Berlin

*above* *Untitled*, 2018, casein paint, pencil and collage on paper, 48 × 101 cm. Courtesy the artist and Tanya Leighton, Berlin

*top* *Untitled*, 2019, pencil, casein paint and collage on paper, 43 × 49 cm. Courtesy the artist; Halle für Kunst, Lüneburg; and Tanya Leighton, Berlin

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*Untitled*, 2018, watercolour and ink on paper, 17 × 25 cm.  
Courtesy the artist and Tanya Leighton, Berlin

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JL No, control is alright. However, to find something new you need to lose control, if you'll pardon the calendar motto. The inclusion of chance, or, on the opposite side, sets of rules determined in advance which automatise certain sequences, or collage, or less specifically any foreign material, or overhasty spontaneity, etc – any kind of measure to discharge myself temporarily of decision-making and to implant unforeseen elements is welcome.

RS *Do you push against a consistent style?*

JL My views and convictions are fairly volatile. This is reflected in a lack of style.

RS *Do you often contradict yourself?*

JL Yes. But isn't absolutely everybody a walking contradiction.

RS *Do you ever make yourself laugh with your work?*

JL At times I laugh when I look at a work of mine and the idea that I created that thing is seeming highly improbable.

[Lipps travels to Athens]

## Self-righteous, smug and pimply

RS *Why are you in Athens?*

JL My partner is showing some magnificent paintings here.

RS *How does having an artist as a partner affect you?*

JL It's good. We have something to talk about.

RS *Do you work from home?*

JL No, my partner wants me out of the house during the day.

RS *What's your studio like?*

JL It's in a boring neighbourhood and measures 30sqm. There are four work desks in it. I can hear my neighbours through the walls.

RS *Are the four desks used in any kind of organisational way?*

JL In theory, one is for messy stuff, one for tidy stuff, one only for watercolours and so on, but in reality all of them are cluttered.

RS *Do you have any habits while you work?*

JL I don't eat much.

RS *Because you forget to eat? Or because you find that eating is detrimental to the work?*

JL It has interesting effects on the serotonergic system.

RS *You've mostly made smaller works. Are you more attracted to small gestures?*

JL I like art made by pupils. Like them I work horizontally, sitting at a desk, looking down. Like in an office. Which has an effect on size. And I work out of the wrist, I don't want the whole arm or the whole body to be palpable.

RS *Because you dislike the look of full-limbed gestures? The feeling of it?*

JL I take that back. But, considering all the inadequate work I produce, if it were in big format where would I store it? The amount of paint I would need. It would be a logistical and psychological nightmare.

RS *How would making work vertically affect you?*

JL Watercolours drip.

RS *What attracts you to work made by pupils?*

JL For instance the economy of means. And the simultaneity of zealous, forward-pushing expression and imposed schoolwork. Generally, school, with its classes, teachers, grades, its architecture, blackboards, janitors, ideals, divisions and hierarchies, is good material for me.

“Generally, school, with its classes, teachers, grades, its architecture, blackboards, janitors, ideals, divisions and hierarchies, is good material for me”

RS *Did you enjoy school?*

JL Not especially. Thinking of it as a repressive institution and therefore disliking its human chummy face, I rather wanted school to be clean and strict. But I was self-righteous, smug, pimply and much less clever than I thought.

RS *Were you drawing in your school days?*

JL A lot. Mannered, comiclike and not worth mentioning. I did some nice paintings though. Most of them I gave to my parents. When they moved to another house some years later, one of the bigger paintings didn't fit on the kitchen wall until they used a buzzsaw to make it smaller.

[Lipps travels to Hydra]

## Stress headaches

RS *Why are you in Hydra?*

JL Having a vacation.

RS *How often are you not working?*

JL Maybe two months a year.

RS *What do you do in that time?*

JL Loitering.

RS *Does making art feel like work to you?*

JL In the best case it does.

RS *Because work is more gratifying than play?*

JL I am prone to a guilty conscience, and work is easily justifiable. Also, while making art I am a grafting grown-up, which is turning into a teenager, which is playing an adult. Which is enacting an unoccupied older person. And so on. I think that this indiscernibility of work and play is a good definition of art.

RS *Would you say that most your work comes out of drawing?*

JL Lately I've increasingly been using thicker paint and a more restricted palette, and now the line or mark is less important. Maybe not so much in the result, but in the operation of painting. It's less drawing than colouring in.

RS *Does colouring feel childlike to you?*

JL It's an enjoyable way to spend time. Working can be a torment. Meditative activities like colouring are soothing.

RS *What most frustrates you about the act of painting?*

JL Producing a lot of boring and unpleasant stuff on my way to an adequate result.

RS *What's the ratio of unpleasant to adequate work?*

JL 9:1.

RS *Do you throw away the work you dislike?*

JL Only the most unsupportable pieces. The rest is kept on file. Some of it, left sitting in the dark for years, might grow on me.

RS *How would you describe your experience of exhibiting work?*

JL In the beginning I was very nervous. I had to throw up during openings. I still get stress headaches.

RS *Why do you continue to do it?*

JL You mean showing my work? It's very simple, I strive for recognition. Sometimes it also pays my bills.

RS *Do you ever consider not showing?*

JL It's more that other people consider not showing my work. As long as I am engaging in this line of work, I will always try to publicly give account.

Ross Simonini is an artist and writer living in New York and California