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Jana Euler  
*Circling the Horizon*

# THE GOOD THE BAD & THE UGLY

By Rachel Wetzler



Jana Euler: *Analysemonster*, 2014, oil on canvas, 78 3/4 by 59 inches.

Jana Euler does not make bad paintings, but she does, more often than not, make ugly ones. Though her work ricochets between diverse stylistic registers, it tends toward the viscerally off-putting, grating, or garish, qualities that are curiously amplified by her display of sheer painterly competence. Bad painting and ugly painting are often conflated—there is even some categorical slippage in Marcia Tucker’s catalogue essay for her 1978 New Museum exhibition “Bad Painting” about whether the “badness” on display was primarily a matter of taste or technique—but they aren’t the same.<sup>1</sup>

Bad painting—whether of the American variety identified by Tucker, or the more acerbic German type represented by the circle of Martin Kippenberger, Albert Oehlen, and Jörg Immendorff—approaches the medium as something that can only be pursued ironically, through a posture of carelessness, haste, and disregard. Its ugliness is of the second order, an effect of its ostentatious repudiation of proficiency. Any number of contemporary artists continue to mine this vein, but Euler isn’t one of them. There is nothing de-skilled about Euler’s approach: ugliness here is a choice, and a deliberate one. Her paintings are self-evidently labored over, made slowly and precisely. Their





*Under Distraction*, 2019, oil on linen, 78 by 86 inches.

features may be repellent, but there is no mistaking them for slapdash accidents. The ugliness she courts isn't the sublime kind. Euler's paintings don't thrill or terrify; they itch. Take, for instance, *Analysemonster* (2014). Standing over six feet tall, the canvas is consumed by a frankly hideous creature, a sort of troll with outsize hands and feet, giant pink ears with swollen orange lobes, a mottled red tongue spilling from its mouth, green-and-yellow saucers for eyes. In place of a chest, it bears a glowing green void with three hearts—the Valentine's Day kind—overlaid with sketches of couples; swimming in its head is a similar line drawing of a figure giving birth to a monster not unlike this one. When I encountered the painting, in the artist's 2017 solo show at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, it elicited an audible shudder: the work seemed, at first, like little more than a dumb gag, as if Euler were simply antagonizing the viewer with bad taste, challenging herself to push the limits of unpleasantness to an extreme. But within this misshapen jumble of limbs is a staggering self-reflexive gesture hiding in plain sight: the figure's gargantuan hands and feet are pushed up against the picture plane, pressing on it as if it were a pane of glass. *Analysemonster* invokes the foundational metaphor of painterly illusionism—the picture plane as a window—and then doubles down, recasting that window as a barrier. The ugliness of Euler's work enables the subtlety of its intelligence: faced with an epidemic of inattention, the painting acts like a Gorgon, freezing the viewer before it.

*Analysemonster* is a representative example of Euler's work only to the extent that her oeuvre is comprised entirely of outliers. I just as easily might have begun with *Shape of Painting, Summer Hit 2017* (2018), a closely cropped portrait of the pop singer Ed Sheeran that exchanges imagined monstrousness for unforgiving realism, highlighting the human form's own innate capacity to look gross. Or I might have cited *race against yourself* (2018), in which the distended body of one figure winding through the canvas serves as a backdrop for another riding a human morphed into the shape of a horse, the whole thing rendered in a nearly monochrome palette of beige flesh tones. But for all Euler's stylistic heterogeneity, certain threads run through her work. She takes up the figural grotesque to express the proliferating pressures placed on individual—and artistic—subjectivity within twenty-first-century networked culture, doubling this reflection back onto the conventions of painting: Euler's figures are confined, occluded, turned inside-out, or otherwise in conflict with their environments, both boxed in psychically and formally restricted by the boundaries of the canvas. Instead of scaling figures to fit the frame, Euler forces them in, as if shoving a corpse into a suitcase. But her paintings also implicitly address themselves to viewers whose eyes are pulled between artworks and iPhone screens. If her work models the demands of the attention economy, it also deploys ugliness as a kind of strategic countermeasure.



*Shape of painting, summer hit 2017, 2018, oil on canvas, 78 3/4 inches square.*



*Ruth Suckale, 2009, oil on canvas, 44 by 36 inches.*

BORN IN 1982 IN FRIEDBERG, GERMANY, AND now based in Brussels, Euler studied under Michael Krebber at Frankfurt's Städelschule from 2002 to 2008, a milieu she satirized in the early series "Ambition Universe" (2009–10). Drawing on the caustic verism of Neue Sachlichkeit, she portrays an array of European art world luminaries—artist Wolfgang Tillmans, writer Diedrich Diederichsen, museum director Daniel Birnbaum—with grasping, outsize hands, each one set against an incongruous backdrop inspired by the subject's zodiac sign. But one painting in the series makes clear that these are more than just straightforward, if unflattering, portraits of institutional figureheads: *Ruth Suckale* (2009) depicts the lone woman included, curator Ruth Noack, in waist-deep water with a bare masculine torso—belonging, as the title discloses, to the young German artist Stephen Suckale. All the figures are, in fact, intergenerational hybrids, the faces of Tillmans et al. conjoined to the bodies of Euler's male Städelschule peers like Nicolas Ceccaldi and Andrei Koschmieder, at once mapping a social network and staging a psychodrama about professional aspirations. Euler employs a similar idiom in a 2012 trio of allegorical portraits exhibited at Real Fine Arts in Brooklyn that year, each depicting a closely cropped woman's head atop a schematic grid and a pattern of repeating, diagrammatic motifs, like wallpaper made up of textbook illustrations. The portraits are rendered in thin, translucent layers of oil, so the matrix underneath bleeds through. In *Social Expectations Overpainted*, a young blonde with calm, closed eyes lifts a green-tinged oyster to her lips, her face imprinted with line drawings of hands holding wineglasses interspersed with kitchen faucets, while *Omnipresent Instincts Overpainted* shows a brunette smoking a cigarette atop vignettes of animals fighting. The third painting is a self-portrait: over a ground of anonymous profile heads and stick figures, the artist is seen gazing sidelong at the viewer, as three precisely rendered paintbrushes touch up her face. Euler flattens and externalizes each subject's instincts, desires, and urges—her own included—revealing them to be little more than an array of standardized social responses. As the German critic Isabelle Graw has argued, Euler's invocation of Neue Sachlichkeit telegraphs the link between the Weimar era and our own: a biopolitical obsession with bodily surveillance and control, registered in the Neue Sachlichkeit portrait's mapping of the brutal facts of the body's surface.<sup>2</sup> Euler updates this mode for the present, at a time when not only our behaviors, but our thoughts, feelings, and moods can be mined, commodified, and sold back to us so effectively that it's impossible to tell where one begins and the other ends.

A more recent group of paintings, shown at London's Cabinet in 2017, turns this theme surreal. Four of the paintings depict "empty" faces—one human, one a yellow smiley, two watches—whose features have been displaced to the margins of the canvas, leaving uncanny





*Whitney*, 2013, oil on canvas, 74 by 118 inches.

central voids. They are paired with shallow representations of plenitude that might fill them: religion, beauty regimens, consumption—the last bluntly embodied by an overflowing garbage bag. One titled „ „ (2016) tunnels through a woman’s face, the void where her nose should be offering an impossible view of her body, both back and front. Inverting the Surrealist trope of the body in pieces, Euler offers a form that is cohesive, but incoherent, a smooth and precise anatomical aberration. It finds its double in *Filled (capitalism)*, 2016, a lithe, crouching nude—face and fingernails painted, crotch shaved—futilely attempting to embrace her own phantasmic reflection.

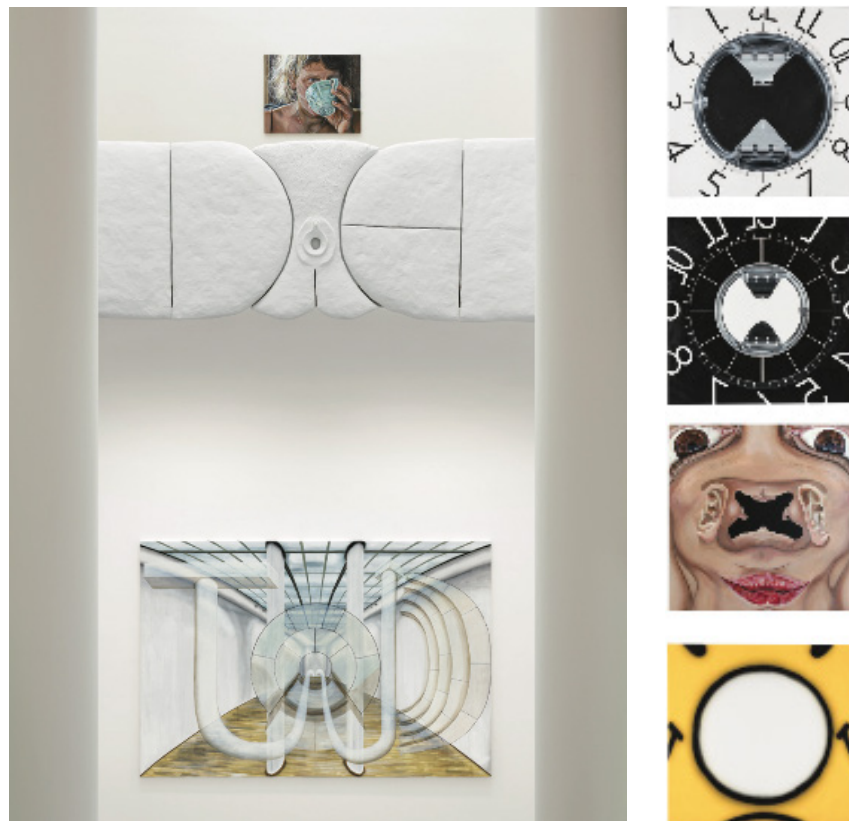


*Form Follows Information Exchange 1, 2, and 3*, 2010, clay, video, and mixed mediums.

Other works—including the artist’s occasional forays into sculpture—have more overtly addressed the incursions of technology into every aspect of contemporary life. In her 2010 exhibition “Form Follows Information Exchange” at dépendance in Brussels, a freestanding trio of pathetic, dessicated figures made of cracked white clay, suggestive of mummies, contort themselves, Gumby-like, to view tablet screens embedded in their backsides (“Form Follows Information Exchange 1-3,” 2010). A similar sculpture, *Socketing in the Digital Age 2* (2014) lay face down on the floor of Euler’s 2014 show “Where the Energy Comes From” at Kunsthalle Zürich (it later traveled to Bonner Kunstverein), extending a plug embedded in its hand toward the show’s titular work, a trio of large-scale square paintings, each a painstaking, deadpan transcription of a different European wall socket, down to the sickly yellow tinge of aging plastic.

When paired, these works form a black comedy about the effects of allowing devices to become extensions of ourselves. But on their own, the paintings are more ambivalent: each canvas is framed as a charged zone of energy, undercut by the dull lifelessness of the image.

BY CONTRAST, EULER’S 2019 PAINTING SERIES “Great White Fear” (a selection of which is currently on view in a two-artist show with Thomas Eggerer at Museum Brandhorst in Munich), comprises massive, hyper-real depictions of phallic sharks thrusting themselves out of postcard-picturesque seascapes; it makes a mockery of painterly vitality through a kind of hypertrophic bombast. In these works, Euler responds to the associations of painting with masculine virility—the trope of paintbrush as prick, to paraphrase Renoir—by making subtext explicit, and then ridiculous: her sharks, with ludicrous, veiny shafts for bodies, flail and splash with awkward, pained anthropomorphic expressions. To this she adds an absurdist display of painterly virtuosity, mocking expressive facture in the splashes of water that frame each shark; the singular bravura mark is turned into something at once more banal—merely dripping water, not some essential trace of inner genius—and generic, capable of being replicated even by a dickless painter. Some of the paintings appropriate the styles of specific male painters, as in *gwf9 Richter/ Baselitz* (2019), whose shark is rendered upside-down as a grayscale blur. But if these works are biting critiques of the masculinity of painting, they also hint at an underlying motivation for Euler’s radical eclecticism: her refusal of a signature style, much like her work’s persistent ugliness, pushes against the idea of the artist as an easily packaged commodity, one who, like Pollock, de Kooning, Baselitz, or Richter, can be reduced to a painterly brand.



Left, view of Euler’s installation *MMK Triptych*, 2019, showing (top to bottom) *Moment*, *Origin*, and *Death*. Right, “ ”, 2016, oil on canvas, 82 inches square (1-3); 63 by 65 inches square (yellow).



"I think there is nothing in these paintings you would not see or miss, if left undescribed," Euler wrote in a characteristically terse artist statement accompanying the "Great White Fear" paintings when they debuted at Neu Gallery in Berlin last spring. In contrast to the tendency of contemporary artists to offer elaborate self-theorizations, Euler doesn't disclose much at all about the meanings of her work, or her motivations. She is, however, concerned with the mechanisms of display, staging her exhibitions as ensembles of works in explicit dialogue—or tension—with their institutional surroundings.

Often, she includes paintings or drawings that model the architecture of the space, featuring warped, airbrushed figures contorting their bodies to fit into its confines, a gesture that reached its apotheosis in *Whitney* (2013): exhibited in a small presentation with Stewart Uoo at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York in 2013, the painting is a multilayered rebus linking the Breuer building, the museum's home at the time, to a portrait of Whitney Houston, with depictions of creatures that Euler calls "human snails" coiling around them. Elsewhere, she has incorporated the titles of her exhibitions into large textual friezes or anamorphic wall murals that distort the viewer's



Left, *GWF 5*, 2019, acrylic on canvas, 118 by 78 inches. Right, *GWF 1*, 2019, oil on canvas, 118 by 78 inches

In the past few years, Euler has, on several occasions, exhibited paintings alongside dramatic architectural interventions. For the exhibition "Museum" at Museum Moderner Kunst in Frankfurt in 2019, Euler responded to curator Susanne Pfeffer's brief to rethink the institutional possibilities of a twenty-first-century museum, with a site-specific triptych, *MMK Triptychon* (2019) for the museum's central stairwell. Spanning the bridge linking the museum's two wings and bracketed above and below by two paintings, it depicted a radically foreshortened frontal view of female genitalia, its white plaster form merging seamlessly into the existing architecture.

IN "UNFORM," EULER'S CURRENT EXHIBITION AT Artists Space in New York, her first institutional solo show in the United States, Euler's painting practice and her interest in exhibition architecture have finally fused. At the center of the exhibition is a group of nine works (all 2020) depicting massive orange slugs, hybrids of painting and sculpture that are attached, in various configurations, to the ornate fluted columns running through the gallery space. Among the first wave of artists to exhibit in Artists Space's new Tribeca home, which opened late last year, Euler made multiple site visits over the course of the building's renovation, taking her cues from the space's construction. By the entrance, one slug seems to lounge on the floor, leaning its back against a column; several slugs absorb the columns entirely, creating an equivalence between painterly and architectural support. Other slugs are suspended between columns using straps. One, ram-rod straight, is horizontal. Two others, impressive feats of engineering, form rings around the columns, encircling without touching them.

As curator Jay Sanders outlines in the exhibition booklet, Euler's slugs model possible relationships between artist and institution. In almost each case, the predicament seems dire: according to Euler, the slugs that absorb the column simply reiterate its form in the guise of overtaking it; the horizontal slug, which swings back and forth like a battering ram when disturbed, performs harmless gestures of critique. The circular slugs, who avoid institutional contact, are "locked into masturbatory position," devouring themselves in a solipsistic refusal to engage.<sup>3</sup>

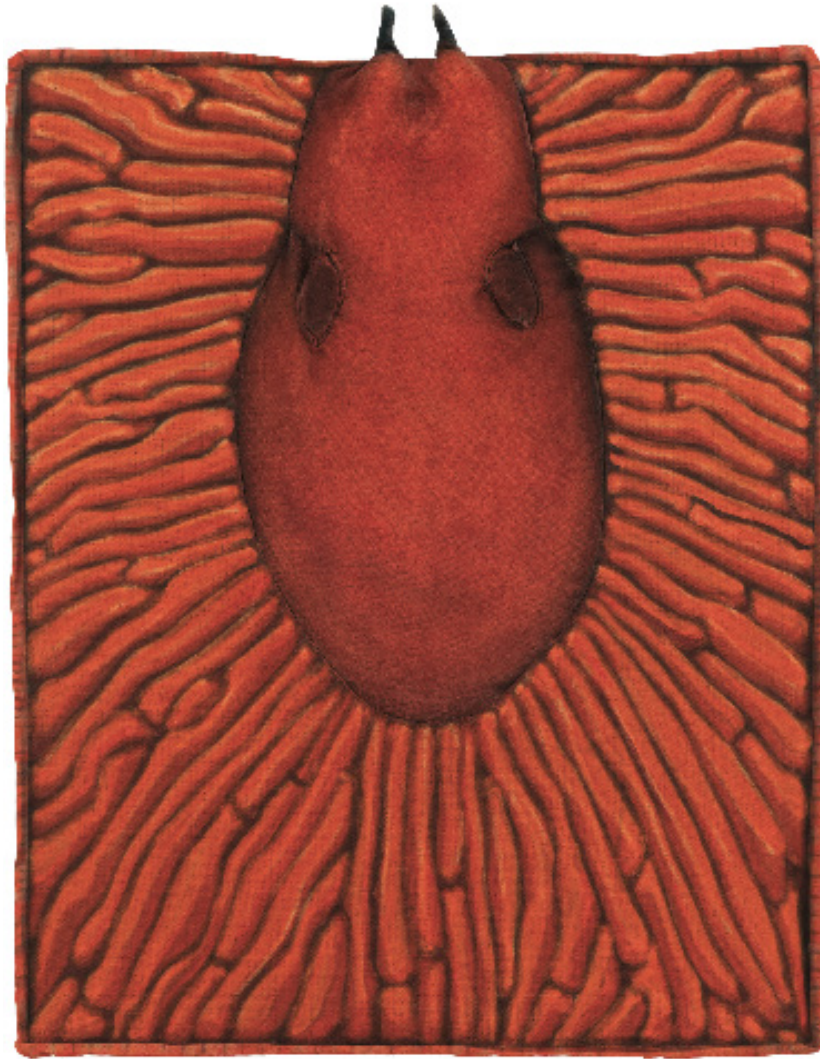
Surrounding the slugs on the gallery walls are several new canvases (all 2019) that sit on a similarly circumscribed continuum of freedom and restraint. *Under Distraction*, represents a face with obliterated contours, an amorphous, allover field of airbrushed facial features crossed with various vices: cigarettes, drugs, pizza, laptop screens. Another, *Circling the Horizon*, shows four versions of the same male nude in a wild expressionist style on a ground of raw canvas, variously posed—spread-eagle like the "Vitruvian Man," standing casually, crouching, and lying on his side. Each iteration of the figure corresponds to a different orientation of the square canvas, a destabilizing move that resists any perceptual grounding; handles projecting from each side of the canvas signal the possibility of reorientation—albeit in fixed increments. A pair of facing canvases, *Close Rotation (Right)* and *Close Rotation (Left)* are mirror views of the same composition: a nearly nude male figure painfully contorting his body to fit the dimensions of the canvas. But while the paintings are echoes of one another, they differ in material and technique: one is painted in oil, the other in hazy airbrushed acrylic; the former is also four square inches larger. If Euler calls attention, here, to the painting's material existence as an object—pigment on flat canvas of a particular size and shape—she does so through means that are both anti-modernist and anti-classical: delicately modeled nudes stuffed inelegantly in a box, hunched and skewed, with every hair, wrinkle, and paunch rendered in almost microscopic detail.



View of Euler's exhibition "Unform," showing (on wall) *Close Rotation (Right)*, 2019, acrylic on linen, 78 inches square.

Euler's slugs are not so much painted sculptures as paintings made sculptural. She painted the components flat on unstretched linen canvas and then assembled them in situ. If the wholes cohere into a painfully representational form, the individual elements are largely abstract: bloomy, stained fields of pigment on the creatures' undersides; striped and stippled patterns on their tops, rendered in the same translucent layers that characterize her two-dimensional canvases. The experience of walking around them is one of toggling back and forth between abstraction and figuration, image and object. They are at once unlike anything she's ever exhibited, and utterly emblematic in their mix of painterly intelligence and aesthetic unpleasantness: what could be less beautiful than a room crawling with giant gastropods in a palette of





*Unform 1*, 2019, acrylic on linen, 78 by 63 inches.

cone orange? But, as in *Analysemonster*, their ugliness forces a kind of close looking, one that prompts probing reflections on medium, representation, and form. One slug is unlike the rest: *Unstretched, bound, outside mission* spans the threshold between inside and out, suspended on the building's facade with a rope tied to a column in the gallery's interior, a configuration that "licenses the slug to venture into the world outside, with the potential for freedom and possibility of harm."<sup>4</sup> Neither detached from the institution nor totally part of it, this slug seems to embody Euler's own ideal relationship to painting: simultaneously in dialogue with the medium's conventions and unencumbered by them.

<sup>1</sup> William Copley, Marcia Tucker et al., *"Bad" Painting*, New York, The New Museum, 1978, np.

<sup>2</sup> Isabelle Graw, "Social Realism: The Art of Jana Euler," *Artforum*, November 2012, pp. 234–41.

<sup>3</sup> Jay Sanders, "Jana Euler: Unform," exhibition brochure, Artists Space, New York, 2020, n.p.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

#### CURRENTLY ON VIEW:

"Jana Euler: Unform," at Artists Space, New York, through Apr. 19;

"Spot On: Jana Euler & Thomas Eggerer," at Museum Brandhorst,

Munich, through Apr. 19.