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Former GDR painter Bisky on his new exhibition double-bill

BY ANNA LARKIN, RENE BLIXER NOVEMBER 7, 2019



Photo by Iryna Sylinnyk. Catch *Rant* (Nov 9 - Feb 23) exploring the final days of the GDR at Potsdam's Villa Schöningen and *Pompa* (Nov 10 - Jan 16) a collection focused on the early 1990s at Kulturforum's St. Matthäus-Kirche.

Painter Norbert Bisky is not only a household name but the epitome of a Berlin artist: he grew up in the Eastern district of Marzahn, came of age during the free partying days of the early 1990s and even has one of his works hanging in Berghain. In time for the Wall celebrations, his experience of Berlin under the GDR and the period immediately after are the subject of two new exhibitions this month, in Potsdam and Berlin, both presented by Koenig Galerie. We met Bisky at his Friedrichshain Hof Studio for a sneak preview and a chat about politics, partying and his childhood in East Germany.

How did the idea for this exhibition on the anniversary of the Fall of the Wall come about with Koenig Galerie, and why did you decide to show your work outside the gallery walls?

It was a process with Koenig, we started talking about whether it would be smart to do an entire exhibition about the GDR and if I should dare to do it. I said yes, and Potsdam's Villa Schöningen located near the famous "Bridge of Spies" is the perfect space for this. Then there's a second part to

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the exhibition, which focusses on the euphoric and chaotic days that followed the Fall of the Wall. St. Matthäus Church, right next to the former border between East and West Berlin, seemed to be an ideal spot.

Is it true that when the Wall came down you were actually sent to a GDR military prison as an army deserter?

Yeah, that was only for a few days, but it was a life-changing experience for me because I realised what a stupid innocent East German boy I was who had no idea about the system I was living in until then.

What happened?

The Wall had already been down for more than three months, and it was utter chaos in the East German army. It's a very interesting moment in a revolution, when the regime collapses but state organisations, the police, the army, etc. are still functioning because these are the same people and they want to perform their job. But me as a 19-year-old boy, and all my comrades at the army just felt the same, and we said: "Listen, this is over, just send us home," but they wouldn't.

And then they put you in prison?

No, it's more complicated! Then, the new government said, if the soldiers want to go home they can. So I thought: "There's a new law, we can go home. This means I go home now." But the day after they caught me where I lived, which was my parents' apartment in Berlin. The military police climbed up to the fifth floor of this run-down building and said: "Hello, we know you ran away from the army, but no problem. You just have to sign a paper. And the paper is downstairs in the car. Could you please come down with us?" I was a polite, obedient boy, so I said: "Of course," but as soon as I was on the street they just grabbed me, put my arms behind my back, pushed me into the car and said: "Now you shut your mouth." And it was nothing compared to what millions of people experienced with the communist regime but I was totally shocked and for me it was an eye-opener. I suddenly

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realised what country I was living in, and how fast you can lose all your rights as a person to those aggressive assholes that are *just doing their jobs*.

Your parents were communist believers and your father was an important man as the director of the film academy in Potsdam... What did they think or feel about your arrest?

My parents were at work. And I didn't have any possibility to give them a call or let them know where I was. My rights were cut off. But when they learned what had happened, they were as shocked as I was!

And how did your parents' lives change after the Fall of the Wall? Was it difficult for them to adapt to new Germany?

I think not so much for my father, because, it's a funny story, but he actually ran away from West Germany! He fled to the East at 18 years old. So there was no big surprise for him. But East Germans like to complain even if, at the end of the day, we were very lucky. Look at the millions of people from Georgia, Poland, Romania, where they are still struggling with a run-down economy and a corrupt system. They are in a hell of a mess.

So you would consider East Germany's integration into reunified Germany to be a success?

A huge success, yes. Of course not for everyone. Of course there are a lot of people who lost their jobs, but as far as I'm concerned, no-one got killed. To start with that, there were thousands and thousands of Russian soldiers, right here with all their weapons, atomic bombs, whatever they had here. Berlin, where we are standing right now, was the place with the most weapons in Europe. Things could have ended much worse.

The regime-approved art of the GDR was Socialist Realism, and your painting has been called New Realism. Is that a label you're comfortable with?

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I totally reject the label of realism. There's nothing realistic about what I'm doing and I don't even believe in the concept of realism. I'm trying to paint my dreams and nightmares and thoughts and crazy ideas, and there are parts of reality in them, and parts of the paintings that look like reality, so you can recognise things like the buildings or the boys, but that's it.



Photo: Bernd Borchardt, copyright VG Bild-Kunst Bonn, courtesy: the artist and König Galerie Berlin. Freizeit 2019.

In a series of canvases we see adolescents training, maybe at a youth camp... Is that personal memory?

When I was 15, I had to go to a military camp, to learn how to throw a grenade and hold a weapon. Every East German schoolboy had to do it. Three decades have passed and I can still remember it very well. One thing you had to learn was how to shimmy along a rope. Normally the group would sit around or stand next to it, checking if you were able to do it or not. And if you weren't, then it wasn't good for the group, so it also describes this kind of pressure that was happening within these East German collectives.

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If conforming was so crucial, who is that woman with blue hair in the painting called “M”?

She's a lady that influenced my life very much. “M” stands for Margot Honecker. She was president Honecker's wife and she was the minister for schooling and education in East Germany. The only one in East Germany who had blue hair, she really had blue hair. She was allowed to have it. It was this kind of fancy thing to do, not really *blue* hair but she put this kind of blue shine through it. She died five years ago, and she was 90 or something. I don't know anybody who did not hate her.

Why did you hate her so much?

She was definitely one of the people who set the rules for schooling and it was a very tough schooling. And a poor one. We learned stupid things. History lessons were horrible political bullshit. And she was the one who said hey, our little boys, they have to do this [pointing at a painting of army training]. We have to put them into camps and teach them how to throw grenades.

For a while there has been an outright rejection of everything in the East. Do you think people are looking at it now with more nuances – it was not all that bad?

Perhaps. But I become very nervous when someone says, “you know, the whole system was a total disaster but childcare was good”. It's like saying, well Hitler destroyed Europe but the *Autobahnen*, they were really cool. Or saying, Hitler was a huge asshole, but he had a very fancy moustache. You cannot get away from the criminal history that killed so many people and made even more suffer.

Do you feel like a victim of that history?

No, not me! And that's a very important point: the communist regime – the Soviet Union, the Eastern Bloc and the GDR – destroyed the lives of many people, but they didn't destroy my life. Not at all. They just showed me their face.

But don't you think it's good people start opening up and talk about their memories in a dispassionate way?

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Sure, I think it's good that people are now starting to talk and maybe even argue a little bit about the situation now and back then. Let's talk and fight and sing, let's paint about it! I say it was a criminal system, and that's really what I believe. But of course people had their life and raised their kids there, so it's not a black and white situation.

Usually people look at their childhood with nostalgia, but you don't?

No, I don't feel nostalgic at all. Probably because I was lucky: the Wall came down when I was 19 years old, and I feel that the most important things, things that count, only started after that. But I can understand that someone who was 50 back then has nostalgic memories. You cannot throw your entire life away just because something is changing.

Thirty years later, after the heady fun of the early 1990s, a particularly exciting time for artists in Berlin, how do you feel about the city now?

I think Berlin is still in a very good moment. I remember this time in the 1990s, and of course it was very cool, the East German industry collapsed and there were all these abandoned industrial buildings, perfect places for clubs and parties. Much better than producing shitty stuff that nobody needs and doesn't function. Of course now it's more expensive and it's much more difficult for younger people, but I think it's still a lot easier compared to London or Paris. It's still an open city. That's what I like so much about Berlin.

And that's why you stay?

Yeah, it's still a city where someone can say I arrived last Thursday and I'm a Berliner now. Berlin is one of the very few places on earth where you can do that. Maybe it's romantic, but I still think that's

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possible and I talk to people who are doing this. They come here and want to forget about what they did before and start something new.

When your exhibitions open, do you have any hopes for how the visitors might respond to the paintings? Or what they might see or read in your work?

No, my hope is that I get better sleep after. And that some of my nightmares, that I still have, disappear. You know, I'm 49 years old now and I sometimes still dream about missing my final exam at school. So that says a lot about myself and also the school system that I was in. Imagine, even though it was so many years ago, it was so much pressure. So yes, I hope some of these bad dreams will go away. And let's see what people say, I don't know. For now, this is more of a dialogue that I'm having with myself.

Bisky fans are in for a treat this month, with the GDR-born painter's newest works displayed in two separate shows. Under the title *Rant* (Nov 9 - Feb 23), Potsdam's Villa Schöningen will showcase paintings that explore the final days of the GDR. On the other side of the former Wall, the Kulturforum's St. Matthäus-Kirche will be displaying works from *Pompa* (Nov 10 – Jan 16), a collection focused on the early 1990s.