

# Erik Schmidt

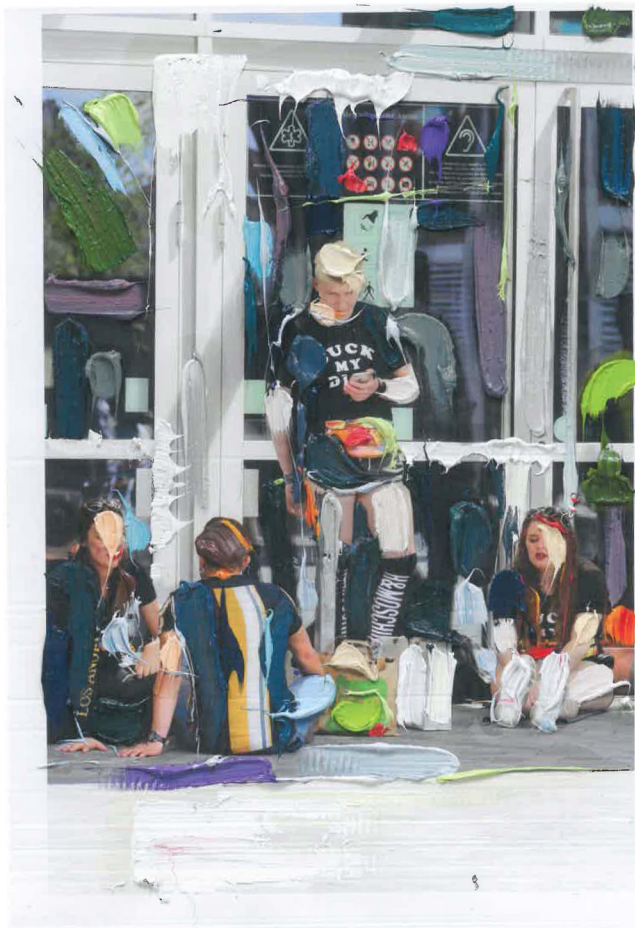
## The View From my Apartment was Invented by Romanticism

BY ADRIANO SACK

The artist Erik Schmidt grew up in Westphalia, studied art and nightlife in Hamburg and has lived in Berlin for over twenty years. The city was the subject of his first large body of work, presented at Carlier Gebauer gallery in Berlin, and is still a recurring subject today. His most recent cycle of works consists of aerial views of Tokyo and Berlin which are first printed onto canvas and then overpainted. Close-up photographs of young people in Berlin, whose faces he partially covers with impasto gestures, accompany these works. Here, Erik Schmidt talks about the history of these works.



*Little Meguro, 2018*



People are people, 2019

**Adriano Sack:** You flew to Tokyo without a plan?

**Erik Schmidt:** I had shown my overpainted Berlin paintings at Gebauer in Berlin and Krinzing in Vienna, oil on printed canvas. And in the past couple of years, I traveled at least once a year to Tokyo. And the last time, I took all these photographs of the city, often from typical tourist spots and observation points.

**AS:** What was the highest spot?

**ES:** The TV-Tower; which is so high that you can no longer make out individual structures.

**AS:** What advantage do you find in observing a city from above?

**ES:** I wanted a change of perspective. In my earlier works, the direction of the gaze always from a lower point up. Historically, the view from below and the view from above are romantic viewpoints, because they do not conform to the experience of everyday life. And Berlin does not have so many skyscrapers, so the view (from above) is not a common one. In Tokyo, there is a large-scale uniformity except for the Imperial Park in the center, which forms a void. It is difficult to make out the city; it is neutral, and endless. There is no horizon. On the street, I observe people for extended periods, and try to get close to them; sometimes too close. Then, I get to the top of a tower again. For me, this makes sense.

**AS:** You got so close to this group of kids, where a boy is wearing this fantastic „suck my dick“ t-shirt.

**ES:** That portrait is still solitary. Back then, I was taking portraits of youth on Alexanderplatz in Berlin and overpainted them. This group portrait was taken at the Mercedes-Benz-Arena; the kids were waiting for the ticket booth to open. The area around the stadium is of these new sites that as a Berliner, you don't visit. The neighborhood on the river Spree is brand new and many young people work there, and a lot is going on. I thought the kids were sweet; and crazy: they were all wearing these "suck my dick" t-shirts. I am always looking for a mood. I always photograph in good light. In New York, for instance, I prefer October—the light

rendered everything absolutely clear. A light like that does not exist in Berlin. Such clarity, you only get close to the sea.

**AS:** Do the kids know that they are art?

**ES:** No.

**AS:** Why are you interested in clusters of people? You also made paintings of "Occupy"-protests...

**ES:** It's about community and agreement. In these clusters, there is no sense of inequality. Whether they demonstrate or visiting a concert—they are feeling connected. That freedom becomes more difficult as we get older.

**AS:** Your series *Berlin from Above* make reference to your earliest Berlin paintings from 2000?

**ES:** Yes. Back then, I was interested in the Eastern section of the city and the prefabricated concrete high-rise buildings. I have wanted to return to the city as a subject for a while, but my travels always interfered. Now I wanted to show the city again, and the view from above allows me some orientation. Berlin is still changing so much: the Potsdamer Platz is being made smaller again, but the Alexanderplatz is crowded and works. Planned urbanism has failed, while the provisional is accepted.

**AS:** What is the source of your renewed interest in Berlin?

**ES:** Because I live here. There is so much being produced about Berlin. Artists from all over the world still move here. They sense that fascination of the new. They simply venture out. And I wanted to gain back that same feeling, to take pleasure in the city again. The response to the exhibition was quite emotional.

**AS:** How did your view of the city change?

**ES:** I looked at Berlin as if it was a city I had traveled to, not one I inhabit, and as if I knew no one. And that still works. I could go and sit at Kottbusser Tor and make work about the people there. The energy in Berlin is different from the energy on Wall Street in New York, but there is an energy.

**AS:** Twenty-two years in Berlin have

an effect on you, your friends, your surroundings. Back then, we did lines of cocaine with the DJ in the toilet, and today, we sit at home and make pottery and sew masks.

**ES:** I don't do that (laughs). But the urbanity of Berlin still fascinates me. The house in the country as a symptom of fatigue is not my solution. I bicycle through the Mauerpark and enjoy the spectacle.

**AS:** Entering foreign milieus was always an aspect of your work. If I understand you correctly, you are saying that the same technique can be applied to one's own city?

**ES:** Exactly.

**AS:** So are these 'Heimatbilder' [pictures of 'home']?

**ES:** No. My enthusiasm for Berlin has remained precisely because I never made Berlin into my 'home.' I do not feel safe in Berlin. But that is something positive. You have to remain vigilant.

**AS:** You don't live in a very cozy area of Berlin. Everyone dreams of traffic-regulated neighborhoods with quaint cafés. You live on a traffic circle surrounded by East German 'Plattenbau' [concrete high rise buildings].

**ES:** The interesting thing about 'Plattenbau' is the structural continuity. My building was completed in the 1970s, and most residents have lived there from the beginning—and are slowly dying away. The area is not hip, investors have not taken over, and gentrification hasn't happened. In Mitte, the entire population has been replaced—here, not at all.

**AS:** You live on the 11th floor—so you already have a panoramic view?

**ES:** Yes, the view from my apartment was invented by romanticism. On the traffic circle, there might be an accident or a demonstration—neither threatens me. It's all theater.

**AS:** How did you get attached to Tokyo?

**ES:** In 2015, I had a residency in Tokyo. That's when I started my first series of paintings of utility posts, seen from below. That also marks the beginning

of the transition to overpainted photographs. The city was difficult in the beginning. I still don't know many people there. I have no desire to travel the world. Rather, I like to return to a few places. The first impressions is almost always touristic; it only opens up through knowledge.

**AS:** Is Tokyo completely different from Berlin, or unexpectedly similar?

**ES:** It sounds strange, but people are rather similar. And urban spaces are well organized and share similarities in that regard. I like that. Futurologists have predicted urban flight, because life during lockdown allows for so little. But I experienced it differently. You can always wander and look. And urban voids, used for Urban Gardening or whatever, are not a desirable thing for me. I don't want a village. And I don't believe that that is the future of cities. You could see that during the lockdown: the urban youth did not lose its dynamism. Maybe it was suppressed for a few weeks, and then they found other spaces, in parks, and apartments, where they could find amusement again. I find this logical and it would be horrible if everyone would just sit quietly at home.

**AS:** About the utility poles: your series of men in suits seem so much more obvious to me that the clusters of jumbled cable, which do not conform to our idea of Tokyo as a well-oiled machine.

**ES:** Well, this is Tokyo, not Mumbai. Ever cable is clean and has a function. There are no dead lines. And in the hypermodern areas, there are no utility poles. As a Westerner, I find this fascinating. In Japan, construction is so fast: first, they build a shell, and behind it, they build an entire house in three months. In Germany, if you have to rerun a single cable, the road is blocked for a year. In Japan, functionality is linked with impermanence.

**AS:** How do the photographs relate to the paintings?

**ES:** For years, photographs have been the source of my paintings. I always take pictures with my SLR camera, never with my phone. The moment of contemplation,

the laboriousness of placing the camera, are very important to me. Phone pictures are too casual, the view through the camera is more considered. And I rarely crop. When I take the picture, the image has been composed.

**AS:** Some authors speak of their characters that once they are imagined, they live their own life, which guides the writer through the story. Do you feel that same about your overpainted photographs? Does the image guide you? Is the painting spontaneous, or do you have a plan?

**ES:** Painting takes time. Nothing about it is spontaneous. It is controlled and considered. I always paint several paintings at once. I wait a day before the next color is placed. You make marks and create rhythm. But in the end, the motif is the guide. I am often asked if I apply my paints with a palette knife or directly from the tube. But I mix them on a palette and apply them with a brush. Even if this may sound a bit esoteric, I need to create an internal vibration and transfer it onto the canvas.

**AS:** You have painted and drawn over other images early on. After your first trip to New York, you worked on advertisements and pornography. What interests you in this process? Do you want to destroy the image?

**ES:** My generation is still fascinated by photography. My overpainting still allows you to recognize the underlying source. But the sense of destruction and disruption certainly plays a role.

**AS:** The view from above is at its most distant. Your overpaintings mask the city. Every house represents a big dream, and you just paint over it.

**ES:** We talked a lot about process, but in the end, it is about painting. The behavior of paint on a surface, even if the pictorial reality still shines through. There are still tiny people in there, somewhere. The distance is not just spatial, it is also temporal. I collect the images, and until I begin to paint them, weeks and months go by.

**AS:** You paint the shadows in your head?  
**ES:** Yes.

**AS:** In your portraits, you enter a new terrain. The close-ups with thick impasto feel completely different.

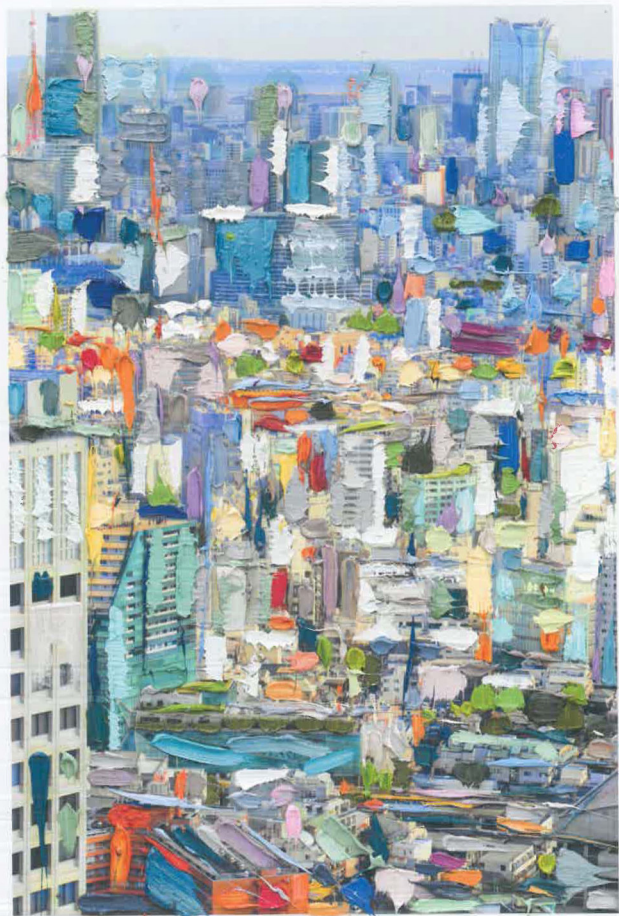
**ES:** I have always painted people, but now, it is much more intimate. You have to respond to the individual person and work with that. And paint is never rude; rather, it flirts and bewitches.

**AS:** Your work has often a violent streak: a man struggles in a swimming pool; you cut up a kimono; you are hunted through the fields. Now you seem to have discovered a new tenderness?

**ES:** Yes, I guess these are 'portrait' portraits. They are less about the paradigm of 'the man in a suit' or 'youth gangs' and more about the individual person. This is a new chapter for me, and I don't know where it will lead me.



Opposite page: *From the cosmos*, 2016



*Oil Carpet, 2020*



*After Lock Down, 2020*