

Erik Schmidt's Exhibition in Castelló: Irony, Melancholy, and an Ethics of the Gaze on Identity

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26 FEB 2026 11:53

The exhibition "The Rise and Fall of Erik Schmidt" by the German artist opens on February 27 at the Espai d'Art Contemporani de Castelló (EACC).

The exhibition isn't even open to the public yet, and it already feels like a unsettling mirror. We toured the spaces of the Espai d'Art Contemporani de Castelló with Erik Schmidt and curator Yara Sonseca as part of a private guided tour before the opening, and the impression was clear: nothing here wants to completely close itself off. The images are offered, but they resist. They seduce, but they do not surrender. As if the artist himself wanted to accompany us only up to a certain point and, from there, force us to look at ourselves as well.

It is no coincidence. The exhibition "The Rise and Fall of Erik Schmidt," which opens on February 27 (at 7:00 p.m.) at the EACC, is not a typical retrospective, but rather a fragmentary narrative about identity, perspective, and the role of the artist in a world saturated with signs. "Rise and Fall" does not describe a linear biography, but rather a masquerade that Schmidt has been exploring for over thirty years through painting, video, photography, installation, and performance.

The Surface as a Battlefield

A central theme of the exhibition—one that also recurs repeatedly in conversations with Schmidt and Sonseca—is the surface. Not as something banal, but as contested territory. In her case, painting is not about revealing a truth hidden beneath the layers, but rather about questioning the very act of seeing.

Urban facades, people passing through, scenes from clubs or Berlin streets appear as if applied with glazes, washes, glossy paints, and impasto, transforming the painting into a skin. A skin that draws us in, yet simultaneously blocks access to a stable background. Here, the surface is not the end of meaning, but the place where it is deferred.

Schmidt states this matter-of-factly as we walk through the room: The visible is never innocent. Everything that appears immediate is already mediated by cultural, social, and affective codes. In his work, seeing means accepting this unease.

Berlin: Walking, Observing, Recording

Since the late 1990s, Berlin has become the great laboratory of his artistic practice. Not as a romantic setting, but as a space of friction: a city marked by historical wounds, reconstruction, gentrification, and the theatricality of the urban. Here, the city functions as an extension of the body. Even when no human figures are visible, the body is present—as absence, as a trace, as a tension between proximity and distance. In his early paintings, the city appears almost like a photographic backdrop: cars, buildings, men in suits, seemingly neutral scenes.

But upon closer inspection, something becomes apparent. The fragmented brushstrokes, the paint itself, and the forced framing shatter any illusion of transparency.

The Self as a Figure (and as a Problem)

Another central aspect of the exhibition is the construction of the artist himself as an ambivalent figure. In several videos, Schmidt positions himself in front of the camera to embody male characters who wander, observe, fail, or simply pass by.

There is no confession, no direct autobiography. There is fiction. The self appears as a mask, as a social role, as a performance. In this sense, the exhibition's title—borrowed from David Bowie—functions as a declaration of intent: the artist unmask himself as a public image, as a narrative, as a pose that is constructed and then collapses.

Throughout the exhibition, Sonseca emphasizes this self-parodic dimension: Schmidt does not portray himself; he fictionalizes himself. He observes himself from the outside, as if he were just another figure in the urban flow.

Painting like photography, filming like painting

In Schmidt's work, the media never behave as expected. Painting adopts the logic of photography: framing, framing, snapshot. Video, in turn, inherits from painting an attention to rhythm, repetition, and composition.

His audiovisual works are often structured as walks, as city tours, in which time itself becomes the material. Walking means observing, but also acting. The cut creates distance, memory, alienation. The result is an identity in constant flux, never definitively fixed.

The Political as Stage

Without pathos or epic grandeur, the political appears in her works as a stage set. Demonstrations, banners, collective gestures—from Berlin to Wall Street—are integrated as fragments of a landscape permeated by signs.

There are no fixed rules. There is only observation. Schmidt shows how the individual moves within collective environments that promise belonging, but also dissolution. The square, the street, the club function as stages on which the self rehearses different versions of itself.

Irony, Melancholy, and Ambivalence

If there is one thing "The Rise and Fall of Erik Schmidt" avoids, it is monotony. Here, humor, irony, melancholy, and a certain bittersweet tenderness coexist. Rise and fall are neither tragedy nor success: they are reversible, almost interchangeable states.

The scenes seduce, but do not soothe. The images are recognizable, but not resolved. Remaining in this ambivalence seems to be more than an aesthetic strategy; it is an ethic of the gaze.

Rethinking Surfaces

At the end of the exhibition, one is left with the impression that Erik Schmidt's work does not seek answers, but rather retrains the gaze. In a world that confuses visibility with understanding, his work insists that the surface is the place where everything is at stake: identity, desire, belonging, the fiction of the self.