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Katharina Fritsch, photographed last fall in her Düsseldorf, Germany, studio with an in-progress sculpture.

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THE MASTER

With her sculptures that elude meaning or easy categorization, Katharina Fritsch has become a true rarity: a sculptor of the female gaze.

By Megan O'Grady Photographs by Bernhard Fuchs

CONSIDER THE ROOSTER. The cockerel — vigilant herald of sunrise, barnyard strutter — has a long iconographic history, appearing on things like weather vanes and churches (as an emblem of St. Peter) and French soccer jerseys (as *le coq gaulois*, the unofficial national mascot). In the Chinese zodiac, the rooster symbolizes honesty, fidelity and protection. In art history's vast bestiary, the rooster appears most famously in Pablo Picasso's 1938 "Le Coq," its rainbow-colored strokes of pastel expressing the chicken's movements, its irascibility and (fittingly, for the artist) its virility.

Katharina Fritsch's rooster is above all that. Over 14 feet high, with luxuriant plumage a shade of ultramarine blue Yves Klein might have envied, the polyester-and-fiberglass sculpture could be found in London's Trafalgar Square, perched high on the square's fourth plinth for the nearly two years it was there (it is now at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C.), piquant company for the traditional statues of self-serious heroes of history — King George IV, Maj. Gen. Sir Henry Havelock and Gen. Sir Charles James Napier, who occupy the other three. (A second rooster is in the sculpture garden of the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis; a third will be shown this month at Matthew Marks Gallery in Los Angeles, accompanied by two other sculptures.) When the Trafalgar Square rooster was unveiled in 2013, then mayor Boris Johnson noted the irony that an unofficial emblem of France had taken roost in a place commemorating a British victory in the Napoleonic Wars. Fritsch's cock, however,

knows no nation. "The French think it's their rooster; the Minnesotans think it's their rooster. It's everyone's rooster," she says with equanimity. Detached from its expected scale, context or hue — here is a chicken, it is blue — the animal seems to have flown in through a rift in the cosmic fabric, evidence of a sprightlier, less pedantic universe.

The dream life of things — animals of all kinds, but also lanterns and shells, strawberries and umbrellas, figures of saints and the Madonna — are what preoccupy Fritsch, a German sculptor famous for her eerily smooth, outsize polyester-and-fiberglass sculptures in bright, matte, addictive colors. All of us bring a set of private associations to our surroundings, and Fritsch's work operates upon and expands this relationship, revising reality just enough to unsettle us and make the subliminal feel real and graspable and even weirdly covetable. The initial visual startle of her work quickly becomes subcutaneous in feeling: the realm of fantasy and superstition. Much of her work plays with recognizable imagery — especially that of Catholicism and the Brothers Grimm — but presents it as if pulled from some half-remembered illusion. Some of her early work is more overtly about subconscious fear, such as her 1993 sculpture "Rattenkönig (Rat-King)," a circle of 16 rats over nine feet tall with a knot of entangled tails, which enlarges a spooky motif to its symbolic proportions.

What does it mean to see our fears and dreams take up physical space? Fritsch's major 1988 work, "Tischgesellschaft (Company at Table)," features 32 blankly impassive, seated men, a nightmare

OF ALLUSION

vision of “identity dissolving in an infinite space,” as the artist described it in 2001, or what it might look like if all of my exes were invited to the same dinner party. As one draws closer, the men

turn out to be all the same man: her boyfriend at the time, Frank Fenstermacher, of the German new wave band Der Plan. Since then, Fritsch’s oeuvre has expanded to increasingly ambiguous tableaux. In the Museum of Modern Art sculpture garden in 2011, she placed a set of stylized figures, including a 5-foot-7 cadmium yellow Madonna; a trio of saints in cobalt violet, green and black; and a giant gray primeval man with a club. A black snake slithers in front of them. The piece is indicative of Fritsch’s larger role as an artist:

This is sculpture not just as allegory but as performance, almost a kind of postmodern stand-up — and a potent exercise in what Susan Sontag called “radical juxtaposition,” surrounded, as it is, by works from the more famous men of sculpture, such as Henry Moore, Auguste Rodin and Picasso.

It can be difficult to locate what it is Fritsch’s sculptures are trying to say, exactly — but this isn’t a criticism. They seem familiar — the rats and succulent-looking fruit plucked from a long-lost fairy tale, the fluorescent Madonna and skulls pulled from an obscure passage of the New Testament — and yet the pieces refuse to supply an identifiable critique of or statement about the tropes we are so used to seeing contemporary art address: consumerism, gender and racial identity. (They certainly spark a certain desire to have them or to be near them that seems intentional — the

‘I think everything can be a sculpture for me. From the beginning, I wanted to create a kind of middle world, a world that really surprises people like they haven’t seen the object before.’

weird, product-like quality a strawberry might attain when enlarged, cushily recumbent and colored blue.) But in their unknowability, in making us search for answers again and again to no avail, Fritsch has created a remarkable and

unique body of work. It provokes sensations of nameless dread or desire rather than a clear reaction, a kind of working lexicon not of the things that haunt us but rather of what it is like to feel haunted.

IN THE DAYS before I met Fritsch in her studio in Düsseldorf, Germany, last fall, as the artist was preparing for her show at Matthew Marks Gallery, one of her animals in particular troubled me: the poodle. Popularized in part by Albrecht Dürer and Francisco Goya, who featured them in their paintings, the breed became the dog of choice for

early 19th-century French prostitutes and later a fad among teenage girls of the 1950s, who put poodle appliqués on their circle skirts. When I lived in Berlin in 2010, standard poodles had become ironic pets among a certain arty crowd, disturbing in the way that only a living creature employed as a fashion accessory can be. In 1996, Fritsch completed “Kind Mit Pudeln (Child With Poodles),” in which four concentric circles of dogs surround a Christlike infant. The absurdity of the animal itself, with its kitschy pompoms, contrasts neatly with their menacing arrangement, which calls to mind the orgy scene from “Eyes Wide Shut,” with a hint of the final moment in “Rosemary’s Baby,” when the coven converges on the cradle.

“I hate poodles, I must say,” Fritsch says over breakfast at her studio, a vast skylit space not far from a large park that was once home to Düsseldorf’s zoo, which was bombed in 1943. Her upstairs atelier overlooks the rail yards. Fritsch is 64 but looks a decade younger; she has a wonderfully mordant, expressive face and a brainy gameness, and is wearing a beautiful shirt of creamy chamois yellow corduroy that once belonged to her father, an architect. Two assistants, young men, say hello; when I turn to greet a third, bent over a worktable, he turns out to be a sculpture. “Ideas emerge from my subconscious all the time,” she explains, sometimes when she’s in transit, in a car or on a train; others originate in her sleep. “I think everything can be a sculpture for me. From the beginning, I wanted to create a kind of middle world that took you behind the object again by yourself, a world that really surprises people like they haven’t seen the object before.”

Achieving this effect depends entirely on perfection of form. In the two-and-a-half-year-long process of creating the rooster, Fritsch moved the tail three times; the chest was especially difficult to get right, as she didn’t want it to resemble the proud chest of Germany’s imperial eagles, nor did she want “a weak chicken.” Since 2006, Fritsch has used a computer at different stages in the development of her prototypes — scanning an object, making a plaster cast she then painstakingly reshapes and remodels, then rescanning and reworking several times to get the shape and detailing precise. To rely simply on a scan, she says, results in work that is “completely flat. I don’t want to be sentimental about this, but to me it has an effect. You lose this third dimension and the sensuality of the materials, the smell and everything. You need that.” When I ask her how casting in polyester works, she opens a can of the viscous stuff and shows it to me, inhaling. “The smell is amazing,” she says.

In trying to pin her down on the various sources of her iconography, I soon feel uncomfortably like a Jungian analyst. One of my favorite of Fritsch's sculptures, "Oktopus (Octopus)" (2010), which features a small deep-sea diver clutched in one of the creature's long orange arms, has its origins in childhood fever dreams and Jules Verne, she tells me. When Fritsch was a child, her father liked to tease her by whipping open an antique encyclopedia to the page with a terrifyingly detailed octopus illustration, but now she greatly admires and even identifies with the intelligent animal. "They are like artists, because they can change their skin within seconds to reflect their environment. I think this is so incredible," she says, explaining that when

she embarks on an animal sculpture, she first learns everything she can about it from books and documentaries and even natural history experts. But creating an octopus prototype proved to be a major design challenge. "First, I tried to make a scan of a real one — we bought it from the fish shop — but you can't scan flesh because it's always moving. And so I had to be the octopus. I was the octopus. I was really feeling the movement, and I knew it had to be like this," and here she imitates the ungainly cephalopod's sideways slump, the extended arm, and all at once, I catch a glimpse of how Fritsch transmits an abstract idea into form.

Fritsch mixes her own pigments; downstairs, there's an entire room for spray-painting. She's

More unfinished sculptures in Fritsch's studio, including one of her signature roosters. She works in polyester and fiberglass with acrylic paint or industrial lacquer.



secretive about exactly how she creates her colors, which are brought to a paint factory to make an industrial lacquer, but the color selection process is entirely intuitive — “I visualize it immediately,” she says. For decades now, she has worked within a recognizable palette, one that might feel ironic in the hands of another artist but

of Fritsch’s creations — her “Rattenkönig” really is just 16 rats in a circle — is part of the experience of viewing her work, which is confounding, frustrating, funny and ultimately moving because of the search itself, the matte porelessness that resists, refuses, interpretation. And yet they are far too fine in their detail — and too affecting — to be anything close to kitsch.

Her sculpture of a pale pink cowrie shell, for instance, over nine feet tall and sweetly creepy, resembles a colossal *vagina dentata*, I unoriginally point out. “You can see it like this. I see it as a shell,” she replies.

“AT 5, IT WAS clear to me that I would be an artist,” Fritsch tells me over lunch at an Italian place in Oberkassel, a bourgeois neighborhood on the other side of the Rhine where the experimental artist Joseph Beuys lived before his death in 1986. Fritsch’s maternal grandfather was a salesperson for Faber-Castell, and his garage was filled, tantalizingly, with art supplies. “It was a paradise,” she recalls. “I was always fascinated by the pencils with all the colors.”

Growing up in Langenberg in the 1950s and in Münster in the ’60s, both near working-class Essen, in the heart of the Ruhr valley,

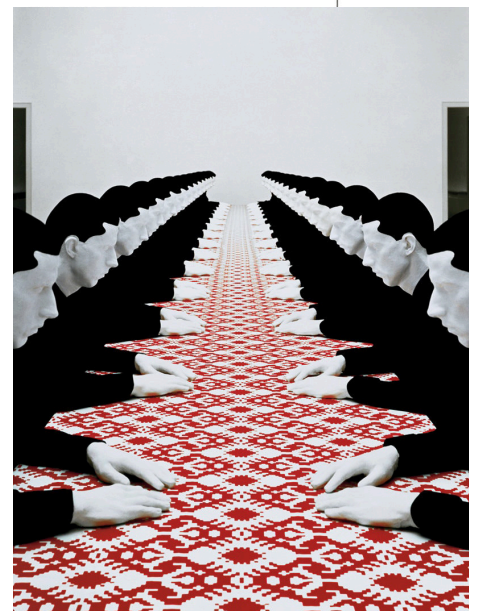
Germany’s heavy industry heartland, art wasn’t an obvious career path. “Maybe my parents were secretly afraid of my never making any money, but they really encouraged me to do that, to paint and to draw,” she says. “My childhood was very sensual. It was a very artistic atmosphere.” And a little



here, applied to her identifiable yet enigmatic imagery, feels more sinister: In addition to her iconic celestial blue and a black so dense it seems to suck color from its surroundings, she often uses cobalt violet, calamine pink, cadmium yellow and a particular unearthly blue-green — a color scheme reminiscent of Prada ads from the mid-aughts. How completely a simple change of hue shifts our perception, I realize as we flip through one of her catalogs together.

Part of Fritsch’s genius is how her work seems to beg for interpretation. Is her octopus a self-portrait, an earnest re-creation of her girlhood nightmares or an attempt at taming those fears by making the creature tenderly comic? The sculpture is sensual enough that I can’t help but identify with it; at the same time, I begin to imagine what it might feel like to have one of those chubby arms hold me in its grasp. This kind of ambivalence, the search for deeper meaning and its almost inevitable unraveling through the sheer literalness

Above: “6. Stilleben (6th Still Life)” (2011), which includes a variety of Christian symbolism.
Right: one of Fritsch’s most famous works, “Tischgesellschaft (Company at Table)” (1988), which features 32 seated men.





FROM TOP: KATHARINA FRITSCH "RATTENKÖNIG/RAT-KING," 1991-93, POLYESTER AND PAINT © KATHARINA FRITSCH/VG BILD-KUNST, BONN/COURTESY OF MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY, PHOTO BY NIC TENWIGGENHORN; KATHARINA FRITSCH, "HAHN/COCK," 2013, FIBERGLASS, POLYESTER RESIN, PAINT AND STAINLESS STEEL © KATHARINA FRITSCH/VG BILD-KUNST, BONN/COURTESY OF MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY, PHOTO BY IVO FABER. OPPOSITE, FROM TOP: KATHARINA FRITSCH, "6. STILLEBEN/6TH STILL LIFE," 2011, BRONZE, COPPER, EPOXY AND PAINT © KATHARINA FRITSCH/VG BILD-KUNST, BONN/COURTESY OF MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY, PHOTO BY IVO FABER; KATHARINA FRITSCH, "TISCHGESELLSCHAFT/COMPANY AT TABLE," 1988, POLYESTER, WOOD, COTTON AND PAINT © KATHARINA FRITSCH/VG BILD-KUNST, BONN/COURTESY OF MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY, PHOTO BY NIC TENWIGGENHORN

gothic: Fritsch kept her religious maternal grandmother company on her many tours of German churches, including the famous 13th-century crypts at Bamberg cathedral. "It's very impressive when you go as a child into the Catholic churches and you see these figures, and there's something that's very cruel about what you see, and I was completely attracted by that," she says. "Bodies dangling from crosses and skeletons in glass tombs?" I ask. "Yes," she laughs. "You have nightmares, but it's so impressive, so strong." At the same time, American culture, its music and tacky consumer products, was conquering West Germany. "I was a big fan of Mickey Mouse and Barbie," she says. "Some parents would never allow their children to have that, but my parents or my grandparents, they were not so afraid of things like that. We — my friends and I — all wanted to be more American." After her application to the Münster Academy of Art was rejected, she instead studied history and art history at the University of Münster. "Art history was terrible for me. It was dusty and lifeless. Art should be alive," she says. The people at the Kunstakademie Düsseldorf, the famous art school whose students had included Beuys, as well as Gerhard Richter and Anselm Kiefer, "seemed to be much cooler," she adds.

One night in 1978, Fritsch went to Düsseldorf to see a performance by Beuys and the video art pioneer Nam June Paik, who, like Beuys, was teaching at the Kunstakademie at the time. The occasion was

a memorial tribute to George Maciunas, a leading figure of Fluxus, the multidisciplinary art movement that fostered experimentation — initially in the form of radical performance — while also stressing the value of art's role in everyday life. "It was something," she recalls. "We went there in a little car with six people and the area around the Kunstakademie was pretty crowded. It was this new wave and punk thing that was going on there." Carmen Knoebel, who was married to the artist Imi Knoebel, ran Stone im Rättinger Hof, a music venue that, much like New York's Mudd Club of the same era, attracted the art crowd; there, the likes of Sigmar Polke and Beuys listened to Krautrock bands like Neu! and Kraftwerk. Fritsch applied to the city's Kunstakademie, Germany's best art school, and got in.

Thanks in part to Beuys's legacy, Düsseldorf in the '60s and '70s represented a place of radical liberation, becoming an essential force in contemporary art. (Beuys

Left: "Rattenkönig (Rat-King)" (1991-93), with 16 rats over nine feet tall in a circle. Below: "Hahn (Cock)" (2013), in London's Trafalgar Square.



was dismissed from teaching in 1972 after he admitted 50 students to his class who had been rejected by the academy.) His influence lived on at the school in its notable painters, like Kiefer and Richter, but also touched Fritsch's generation of students, among them the photographers Candida Höfer and Thomas Ruff, the latter a good friend and frequent collaborator of Fritsch's. Beuys believed that everyone not only could be but already was an artist. But this everything-goes attitude was as much about the tumult of postwar West Germany as it was a reflection of Beuys's own philosophy. This was a generation of artists born into a chastened, broken Germany in the aftermath of World War II, yet who came of age during the Wirtschaftswunder, or economic miracle, in which the industrial Ruhr area played a central role. The country's re-emergence as a modern industrial superpower with an uneasy relationship to its recent past defines the art of this period, which didn't so much address this identity crisis as simply embody it, resulting in one of the most thrillingly innovative periods in contemporary art. As Beuys, whose most famous work includes planting 7,000 oak trees around the industrial West German city of Kassel in 1982, once wrote: "Only art is capable of dismantling the repressive effects of a senile social system that continues to totter along the deathline [sic]." All German artists of Fritsch's generation, in one form or another, have long been preoccupied with the question of what art should be and who gets to decide, and their work reflects profound ambivalence about the human-made world and consumer culture.

In straddling a line between the symbolic and literal, living things and objects, Fritsch's art is itself an ambivalent comment about the elevation of the everyday to a higher realm and the fruitless search for identity and truth in a rapidly changing world. But her very particular aesthetic has always felt larger in scope than the postwar milieu that fostered her, and her work seems to suggest references of all kinds, from René Magritte to Kazimir Malevich — and, of course, a certain essentially punk desire to provoke. When she first entered the Kunstakademie in the late 1970s, painting still dominated, and Fritsch found freedom in the sculpture department, as well as a mentor in the artist Fritz Schwegler (who had been a colleague of Beuys's) and many friends whom she credits as inspiration, including the Minsk, Belarus-born sculptor Alexej Koschkarow, with whom she's exhibited work on several occasions. She attributes her initial interest in multiples and industrial processes to her grandfather back

in Langenberg, not Andy Warhol. At first, she experimented with ready-mades, spray-painting flowers and toy cars with automobile paint. It was in 1987 that she made her breakthrough work, the life-size cadmium yellow Madonna, which became one of her first public works when the Catholic city of Münster installed it in a town square that year (the sculpture subsequently had its nose broken and body graffitied a few times). "When I first painted the Madonna yellow, it was really something," she says. "Now everyone is doing things like that, but at the time, it was really a kind of invention." Fritsch, who recently retired as a professor of sculpture at the academy, where she taught for nine years, laments the loss of that kind of low-stakes improvisation and openness to new ideas, new forms and new names. The Germany she lives in now more or less stands alone as the leader of a fraying democratic Europe, which only enhances some of the mysterious drama of Fritsch's sculptures. What does a Christian symbol mean at a time when much of the developed world is turning away refugees and imprisoning asylum seekers? What is a fairy tale if not a desperate search for home? Fritsch's art raises these questions but refuses to answer them. In the same way that her work defies interpretation, the artist herself doesn't read too much into her formative years, which she sums up as lean and filled with exhilarating, if toxic and rash-inducing, material experiments. "Back then, everybody lived in very bad circumstances and the market wasn't so strong," she says. "We didn't care so much; nobody had any money. It was an innocent time. We were innocent creatures."

DEPENDING ON ONE'S mood, the odd sense of dislocation that Fritsch's work evokes might strike you as irreverent, cleverly transgressive or something more insidious. But the longer I'm in its presence, the more I sense a kind of moral intelligence in her objects, which distance us from our well-worn perceptions and feelings. Then there's the implicit feminism in a female sculptor looking at men — still, oddly, something of a rarity in contemporary art. Fritsch's men — which have included, over the years, a monk, a doctor and a be-toqued chef — call to mind, respectively, Caspar David Friedrich, Faust and an employee of a Bavarian beer hall. They are not in any way erotic. She uses friends as models, men with a certain kind of vanity, she says; the newest work she's preparing for the upcoming show includes two male figures holding mobile phones. The models were the art historian Robert Fleck and the artist Matthias Lahme, and the piece is a reflection of Fritsch's increasing concern about

the disconnections and false promises of a digital age — our total absorption into unreal realms and the particular seductiveness of this form of consumption. We peruse the internet for things that we probably shouldn't: homes, partners, employment, an unnamed and impossible fulfillment. The oblivious blue men clutching their phones are unsettling not because they look so different from us but because they are exactly the people who surround us, who perhaps *are* us.

"I must say that this generation of mine, we were the power women of the 1980s, and we wanted to be strong and straightforward. But then the generation afterward wanted to be feminine, to look nice and to have children, and they also wanted to have a big career. It's such a pressure," she says, referring to the ongoing debate about gender roles in Germany, where women occupy powerful positions in politics but are far less prominent in art and business. While Fritsch is single and has neither children nor poodles — she spends much of her days happily occupied with running her large studio — she's surrounded by a circle of artist friends and is very close with her mother and sister. Sculpture, in particular at this kind of scale, demands very hard physical labor, and casting her molds also involves contracting with industrial workshops staffed exclusively by men: "You get more and more conscious of that, how they treat you and how they often don't listen to you." The fabricators, she explains, will often speak to her male assistants instead of to her. "And then I say, 'Look, please, at me and talk to me. I'm giving the order, I'm paying you.' Only then, you are in the stupid position — then you are the old bitch."

In the market, her work does not sell in the same league as Jeff Koons or Damien Hirst, whose careers have, at times, seemed to parallel hers: Fritsch made the Madonna in 1987; that same year, also in Münster, Koons installed a statue of the traditional German figure of the Kiepenkerl, a traveling merchant; she completed "Tischgesellschaft," the large-scale work featuring Fenstermacher, in 1988; Koons debuted his series of sculptures and paintings featuring himself with his lover, the porn star Cicciolina, "Made in Heaven," in 1989. Fritsch weathered the art world's rapaciousness in the 1980s, refusing to churn out work too fast or under pressure: As such, she never turned cynical. She rarely speaks to the press. But she is understandably disappointed that she isn't spoken of in the same breath as some of her male counterparts nor widely credited for her influence on turn-of-the-century sculpture. At the same time, her unwillingness to please has, she believes,

protected her from a factory mentality she sees in male celebrity artists, from a "heaviness" that isn't just about literal weight.

With this in mind, I ask her if she thinks her work has shifted in meaning through the years, as the art world has changed, not to mention the larger world around her, drowning, as we are, in images of things, from memes and emojis to styles that quickly disseminate and dissipate. It hasn't, she tells me. "The first picture I have in my mind is still the one that is important."

I think of this a week later, back home in Chicago, touring future kindergartens for my 4-year-old, when I observe a classroom of young children Magic Markering identical photocopies of a rooster. As they carefully fill in the cartoonishly thick black outline of its body — this is the kind of school at which staying in the lines is encouraged — I wonder if this will become the prototypical notion of "rooster" that sticks, the picture that springs to mind when they hear its name. (Few of these urban preschoolers are likely to have spent much time around live chickens.) What could this picture possibly mean to them? The coloring-book rooster is merely an echo of an echo, a signifier absurdly distant from the hectic, strident reality of the animal itself, so incidental, in this context, to its own representation. Once upon a time, our forebears gathered around a fire to tell stories; they painted the bison that sustained them, lining cave walls with animals and hunting scenes filled with tenderness and meaning. In doing this, they created what was, for them, a resonant collective iconography; now, of course, these prehistoric paintings are touching in a different way. This, I think, is why Fritsch's work continues to unsettle: Its distance from reality feels unnervingly reflective of the way we live today, increasingly remote from our own animal instincts, our original fears, hungers and joys — the sacral coding that helped remind us, before we made art or commerce of identity, of who we were.