

EVERY PICTURE TELLS A STORY

By Kyle MacMillan – Denver Post Fine Arts Critic

While the art world is understandably obsessed with China, where a new painter busting with talent seems to emerge every week, it would be a mistake to overlook Germany's ever-regenerative scene.

Fueled by established artists such as Gerhard Richter, Sigmar Polke and Georg Baselitz and a burst of newcomers, the country's art scene reached a new peak in the 1980s. If it has receded some since, it remains vital and significant, in part because of the rise of the New Leipzig School.

Helping write the latest chapter in Germany's art history is Susanne Kühn, a 38-year-old Leipzig native who is featured at the Museum of Contemporary Art/Denver — her first solo museum exhibition anywhere.

The show, which consists of six large-scale paintings, including an 82 3/4-by-134-inch diptych and a smaller one finished just a month ago, fits nicely into the large works gallery, with the ensemble possessing an appealing, airy feel. In the museum's newly opened, 27,000-square-foot building, with five relatively small, wholly independent main galleries, compact, focused and easily digestible offerings like this one have become the norm.

In 2004-05, the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles presented "The Undiscovered Country," a milestone exhibition that once again reclaimed painting from the naysayers who routinely proclaim its death and sought to define a new prevailing direction in the medium. Looking back to the work of Fairfield Porter, who was relegated to the art world's periphery for nearly his entire life, and other painters of the recent past, a new generation of artists are

attempting to mediate between the previously opposed artistic poles of realism and abstraction.

In this new brand of painting, past and present, the fanciful and naturalistic and the rigorous and relaxed commingle sometimes comfortably, sometimes uncomfortably. "The result is a painterly ambiguity that holds the viewer in suspension between the inescapable history of the medium and immediate



ABOVE: SUSANNE KÜHN, MELANIE – MELANCHOLIE (MELANIE – MELANCHOLY), 2007.

physical presence of the work, between the pull of memory and the constantly renewing present," wrote curator Russel Ferguson in the catalog for "The Undiscovered Country."

This aptly describes the work of Kühn, who was not included in the Los Angeles exhibition but certainly would have fit right in. The painter straddles two artistic worlds – Leipzig, where she grew up and earned her masters degree, and the United States, where she lived 1995-2002, including a year of postgraduate studies at Hunter College in New York City..

Inevitably, she shares some of the traits of the new Leipzig artists including their bold, often non-objective use of color and strong narrative sense, not to mention a passion for the medium. But she also looks to such American artists as Kerry James Marshall, a kind of neo-historical painter who was spotlighted in "The Undiscovered Country."

In her complex, psychologically charged paintings, Kühn constructs fanciful worlds, private and closed in many ways yet broadly resonant and open to a range of interpretations.

In slightly older works, such as "Melanie in the Forest" (2005), Kühn created fictional landscapes, but in more recent works, she has turned to architectural realms, such as "Katja's Dream" (2007), a sprawling diptych with almost endless depth.

The foreground room converges through a doorway into an adjacent room and a central diagonal continues into the distant outdoors, with a tiny, barely perceptible figure running in the distance. Adding to the overall sense of ambiguity, Kühn stretches the line of sight to nearly the breaking point as she simultaneously flattens the perspective in fascinating ways, with a bed appearing to have almost no depth at all.

As in many of her works, the artist uncomfortably inserts a figure into the scene, a young woman, with an air of ennui, posed awkwardly on the bed. Such figures provide a human dimension but raise questions at the same time.

In this work and the other selections, Kühn contrasts different types of paint — acrylic and old-fashioned pigments, and she intermingles a variety of ways of applying paint, from wash-like effects to more of a matte finish.

Kühn draws on the old masters for her architectural interiors, using in "Still Life With Books" (2008) what appears to be a variation on the room in Van Eyck's "Giovanni Arnolfini and His Wife Giovanna Cenami (The Arnolfini Marriage)" (1434) at the National Gallery in London.

But she updates the furniture and creates her own iconography, adding a few of the contemporary toys that populate many of her paintings, such as a knight on a horse, as well as a couple of open books, including one focusing on Japanese Ukiyo-e prints.

As this small but potent exhibition makes clear, Kühn is a substantial artist whose career is sure to continue its upward surge.