

# SEANKELLY

Baker, Elizabeth C. "Terence Koh – Schirn Kunsthalle," *Art in America*, December 2008.

## Art in America INTERNATIONAL REVIEW

FRANKFURT  
TERENCE KOH  
SCHIRN KUNSTHALLE

Following his roomful of blinding white light at the Whitney Museum last season [see *A.I.A.*, Oct. '07], Terence Koh, in his recent Frankfurt exhibition, "Captain Buddha," offered a less assaultive, more complex white-light experience. The installation occupied a tall, navelike gallery. The overhead illumination was powerful but did not put visitors' retinas at risk. All the architectural surfaces were painted white, and the space initially appeared empty. There was an effect of a pervasive white haze. Slowly, a series of small-ish sculptures, positioned close to the gallery's long side walls, seemed to separate themselves one by one from the luminous surroundings. Many were assemblages of familiar objects, others casts of small animals, or human hands or feet. There were 15 sculptures altogether, made of bronze and coated in white. Some were set on simple plinths, some suspended from above, others placed directly on the floor.

Proceeding from the entrance along the right-hand wall, one encountered, for example, a diminutive four-footed

creature formed of the back ends of two cats, joined at the "waist"; a svelte human leg from above the knee to the toes, pointing skyward from a low pedestal; a small dead bird lying on its side on a somewhat higher pedestal, feet pathetically curled, a thin, unpainted wooden stick threaded through its eyes—a brutal gesture. Elsewhere in the show, occasional brownish drizzles or smudges suggested mud or perhaps excrement. Cumulatively, the sculptures summoned a melancholic narrative of life processes gone awry.

Midway in the space, the show's titular piece loomed into view: a cast of a skinny, naked young man seated in a lotus position on a narrow platform covered by a deeply cracked white crust. Advancing beyond the Buddha, one finally could make out the show's sinister dénouement—a large swastika centered on the end wall, composed of 55 identical toy soldiers, rifles at the ready, feet affixed to the wall.

Moving back toward the entry, one came upon a tire from which radiated eight toilet plungers; a suspended bicycle wheel lashed to an African nail fetish; a pair of hands gripping a leafless branch, as if in desperation; and a dilapidated umbrella frame attached to a dead rabbit. (Koh is into bunnies—see [asianpunkboy.com](http://asianpunkboy.com) and [kohbunny.com](http://kohbunny.com)—as was Ray Johnson.) Though they felt somewhat anti-climactic after the Buddha/swastika

standoff, these pieces, too, intimated forlornness and ruin.

The Kunsthalle's website explains that components of the sculptures were brought back by the artist from China, Belgium, Burma, Mexico and other far-flung locations. The pieces were "initiated" in a "secret performance" before the exhibition opened. (The museum's website offers excerpts of the event.) In a photo also on the website, Koh styles himself as a dandyish latter-day Andy Warhol, sporting white formal dress, dark glasses and a white wig. The sculptures, however, come across as poetic and personal, with Symbolist and Surrealist overtones. While Warhol can be seen as a prototype for Koh's conspicuous public persona, Koh does not traffic in Pop references. A more plausible lineage might include Byars, Kusama, Meireles and even Nevelson, for their immersive, monochrome environments. Other recent Koh installations have been keyed to red or black.

Koh has rapidly gained prominence with the glamorous/creepy Minimalist melodrama of his performances and installations. Although one may wonder how the "Captain Buddha" sculptures would fare individually if not part of an unfolding sensory trip, the work as a whole convinced through its command of scale, sophisticated visual effects and theatrical assurance.

—Elizabeth C. Baker

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TERENCE KOH: *I AM GUIDING MYSELF TRUE AN IMPOSSIBLE NECTARINE WHAT THEN BECOMES OF THE CAMEL* (FOREGROUND), AND *I AM IN LOVE WITH THE SOUND OF DISCO* (REAR), BOTH 2008; AT THE SCHIRN KUNSTHALLE.