

ARSENAL WIEN

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Arsenal Objekt 19A, 1030 Wien

Simon Lehner

Clean Thoughts. Clean Images.

March 22–June 1, 2025

Clean Thoughts. Clean Images. is the first comprehensive solo exhibition of Simon Lehner (b. 1996) in an Austrian institution.

Is it truly possible to grasp visible and invisible power relations in contemporary imagery? How can socially anchored role models and identities be visualized today—and who benefits from this for political, economic, or cultural reasons? What impact do ideals of masculinity have on us, and how do they shape collective structures of perception? How are they deliberately steered and implemented?

Using a self-created image archive containing around 45,000 image files, Austrian artist Simon Lehner examines the impact of power structures and toxic masculinity on society and the human psyche in his paintings, installations, and video works. Since 2021 Lehner has expanded his personal photographic archive to include elements of popular imagery from the internet. His motifs and figures spill over into our collective visual memory and reflect on the influence of the images on society. This creates “echo chambers” that form a parallel to our limited ability to imagine and remember as well as to our quickly intensifying collective data trauma.

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Like a puppeteer, Lehner controls every detail of the new scenes he creates, demonstrating how fragmented our ability to remember and imagine is. Missing visual information in the works questions the truthfulness of our memories. For example, image material may be out of focus, pixelated, or contain visible glitches. Lehner plays with our digital world, augmenting, changing, and restructuring it. Similar to the way that artificial intelligence (which he intentionally does not use) fills gaps with assumptions based on probability, it becomes apparent that we (re-)construct our own perception based on ideas and expectations. The tempting assumption that our conceptual and visual worlds are *pure* and *authentic* is revealed to be an illusion.

Based on his archive, Lehner uses the photographic and technical parameters of image formation as a foundation on which to play with the characteristic traces of both analog and digital technology: the edges of negatives, markings, and moiré patterns that can occur during scanning and printing remain visible. In a further step, the images are cut into wood panels using a milling machine. These transferred landscapes protrude three-dimensionally into the exhibition space or extend beyond the edge of the frame. With the help of a robot, the paint substrate is completely freed from the two-dimensionality of photography: the images are physically transferred to this relief structure in a painting process in which the machine and the artist take turns during the production process.

The exhibition expands on Lehner's ongoing exploration of power structures, the role of pictures as instruments of manipulation, and their influence

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on the individual. This reveals a reference to the history of painting: peasant paintings were once commissioned by rulers to represent land and social status in a practice that is continued today in the modern phenomenon of government drones capturing precise details of urban areas in order to replicate our living environment in 3D models: this new form of peasant paintings is now done in real time.

The exhibited works were created especially for this exhibition. A catalog will be published by Spector Books, Leipzig.

About FOTO ARSENAL WIEN

FOTO ARSENAL WIEN is Austria's new center for photographic images and lens-based media. Initiated by the city of Vienna in fall 2022, the institution presents and explains contemporary photography in all its forms and uses. FOTO ARSENAL WIEN also organizes the platform FOTO WIEN—Austria's largest, biennial festival of photography—and, in a collaboration with the Kunsthalle Wien, the annual festival Vienna Digital Cultures.

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