

katrin korfmann

Ensembles Assembled

Look at Katrin Korfmann's intensely colorful Castells for the first time, from a distance, and it's a riveting, vibrational image, more abstract than representational, more painterly than photographic. Step up closer, however, and you discover, with surprise, that this is actually an aerial photograph of hundreds of people engaged in some intricate and energetic, yet mysterious, activity that you can't really place; indeed these individuals appear to form a complex, multihued organism, with both microscopic and macrocosmic suggestions. In the Catalonian village of El Vendrell, Korfmann photographed a tradition peculiar to the region: the construction of human towers called castells, meaning "castle" in Catalan. This local tradition dates to the late 18th century and it involves teams (sometimes with hundreds of members) competing to form the highest, most impressive multi-tiered tower. Powerful, stocky people, usually men, support the tower's base; others stand on their shoulders; lighter people climb still higher, and young children scramble up backs and shoulders to the highest level, all occurring in a festive context complete with music, laughter, palpable danger, and exhilaration. Each team wears a matching uniform, for instance green shirts, white trousers, and black sashes, or red shirts, white trousers, and black sashes, and with many teams taking part, castell-building festivals are colorful and exuberant affairs.

Korfmann enlisted a crane so that she was high above the activities looking down. This bird's-eye view is a distinguishing characteristic of the photographs in her excellent new series, and it is supremely effective. With Castells, people and events seem distant and remote, as if photographed not from a crane but perhaps from a satellite: something startling and wondrous is happening way down there on the earth, very far below. The aerial perspective flattens things out and collapses three dimensions into two, largely, but not totally, eliminating height or depth. That's why you barely register the big human towers at all, which is pretty strange when you think about it, since the whole point of the tradition involves marvelous gymnastic feats resulting in sizable towers. This photograph, as with the others in the series, also involves an unsteady shift in perspective. You're looking down, vertically, at all of these people, but also directly at them, horizontally; they are at once below you and in front of you, as if the actual ground in El Vendrell had tilted up 90 degrees to become, in effect, a painting or movie screen. In this vertiginous setting, Korfmann focuses attention on surface colors, rippling textures, and variegated patterns, while emphasizing how all these individuals converge into a spectacular collective entity. She also jettisoned anything suggesting a context or narrative. You see no buildings or town square, no hint of El Vendrell, no outside cultural references, no sky and no horizon. Instead, this teeming crowd fills the whole frame and invites total absorption and concentration. Korfmann's photograph also makes no pretense of faithfully capturing reality. Instead, it is a synthesis of dozens of shots, taken at different times: a composite, fictive photograph of an elaborate and durational event, almost like a film compressed into a single image. Korfmann further manipulated and transformed things by digitally drawing on, rearranging, changing, and sculpting, in a manner, the image on her computer via Photoshop, with visually stunning and evocative results. While Korfmann is a conceptually inclined artist with a special interest in social research, including various kinds of human organization and collective behavior, her constructed images—her

mediated fictions—revel in retinal splendor, and serve as potent, reality-warping forces in their own right. Hybrid to the extreme, combining photography, photocollage, drawing, painting (although no paint is used), film and digital enhancement, her works question and incarnate alternative realities and elevated consciousness, arising from communal, perhaps even ecstatic, events.

Looking closely, you can pinpoint individuals and notice small details—a particular person's exultant expression, fists raised in triumph, the pressure of one body against another—but these details are subsumed in the whole. Surging red forms tinged with pink (from clothing) and flecked with various browns, blacks, and beiges (which are the heads of people), sweep in from different angles, sometimes forming clusters. Light purple forms, tinged with blue, do the same, forming ragged circles. While this dense work is patterned and precisely organized, it is also frenzied and excessive, chock-full of barely containable energy and about to burst out of its rectilinear frame altogether. All of these people in a small Catalonian town, engaging in their robust tradition, seem unexpectedly psychedelic, even hallucinatory, while they also connect with nature and biology; Korfmann's digital manipulations tease out these manifold connections. Loosely floral patterns emerge—petals wheeling around stigmas—and indeed there is something burgeoning and organic about this work. Not just flowers are connoted. You also think of microorganisms and oozing protoplasm, beehives dense with bees, colonies of mold, a fungal colony in a Petri dish; this human spectacle is linked to all sorts of non-human life. You think as well of cosmic structures and events: of Omega Centauri, for example, a pulsating, multicolored, massive star cluster photographed by the Hubble Space Telescope, or the dwarf galaxy NGC 4214, with stars and swirling gas clouds, also photographed by Hubble. You may think of the vegetal patterns prevalent in Islamic art and architectural ornamentation, and of intricately patterned textiles, such as Armenian, Turkish, or Persian carpets (Korfmann's photographs often suggest complex knitted structures and woven textiles.) Toss in hints of Tibetan thangkas and mandala sand paintings, as well as various kinds of Western abstraction and psychedelic art, and you see just how protean and expansive this crowd shot really is. Korfmann had long been interested in this event, and was fascinated by the act of building towers out of humans, especially the power and strength required. Through her complex procedures, she emerged with a cathartic, mind-bending work suffused with multiple connotations and associations.

Each of the works in Korfmann's new series concerns a communal activity, and each offers a decidedly idiosyncratic take on that activity. She is interested in ritual and perhaps even utopian activities when individuals become subsumed in a far larger, collective entity, involving cooperation, but also freedom, wonderment, upended rules, altered bodies, liberated consciousness, excitation, and visual excess. Her three Kolorit photographs—one predominantly red, one yellow, and one purple—are of the Hindu Holi festival in Barsana, India. This ancient festival is celebrated throughout India and other countries with Hindu populations, and has also spread elsewhere, including to my home city of New York, where it is billed as "a joyous celebration of the coming of spring" and as "a night of revelry full of DJs, bands, delicious food, and great people." Not specifically religious, Holi is a spring festival of fertility and new life during which people sing, dance, listen to and play music, cavort about, enjoy food, build bonfires, smear and attack each other with paint, and fling brilliantly colored powders and dyes in the air. During this raucous festival, otherwise rigid social distinctions and rules based on caste, class, gender, and age are temporarily suspended. Everyone is suddenly free and unencumbered in a transformed, outrageously colorful world.

Korfmann's Kolorit photographs are the initial works in her new series, and they explore a fresh approach for her: photographing festivals and celebrations not from up close but from on high, while focusing on their chance, changing, and oftentimes exceedingly complex physical structures—individuals, however unwittingly, accidentally, or chaotically coming

together to make remarkable new forms and structures. Vibrant colors surge and swirl around people, far below, in photographs that again blur representation and abstraction and that very much suggest paintings. The people are the same in each work, while the colors differ markedly, and it is the colors that indicate the passage of time (Holi is often called a festival of colors, which constantly change.) These works are phantasmagorical, explosive, and a riot for the eyes, but what's especially compelling is how they implicate people in world-shaping, biological, and also cosmic forces: eruption and dispersal, regeneration and decay, cohesion and entropy. Because of the aerial perspective, people in the photographs look really tiny, vulnerable, and ephemeral, as they enact their patterns, structures, and pageants on the earth, all the while enveloped by clouds of color. There is a vastness to these works, of time and scale. You are looking at images of events from the recent past, but they could easily be from centuries ago. Ultimately, these works are very sublime, both in a contemporary sense as something lofty and charged with grandeur, and in Edmund Burke's understanding, articulated in his influential 1757 treatise *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, as experiences in nature which involve astonishment, fear, danger, reverence, and a sense of the infinite.

Korfmann often favors local rituals and spectacles, even some barely known beyond the confines of a little town: not the famous Carnevale in Venice, Karneval in Cologne, Carnival in Trinidad and Tobago, or Mardi Gras in New Orleans, but instead El Enfarinats in Ibi (population 24,000) Spain, in the province of Alicante; in this sense her work involves a great deal of cultural alertness and discovery. Each December 28, Ibi is the setting for a townwide food fight involving flour bombs, eggs, and cacophonous firecrackers between "rebels" (dressed in mock military gear and top hats) who temporarily take over the town, and another group (sporting tall black hats) bent on maintaining the traditional order. While in power for a day, the rebels pass absurd laws, deliver nonsensical speeches, mete out ridiculous fines, and lambaste respectable figures such as bankers and merchants. With pelting eggs and blasting flour, the old downtown quarter becomes a foggy, slippery mess through which people rush and scramble.

Photographed from on high, Korfmann's Ibi again dispenses with context and shows very little of the festival and nothing of the town, save for the ghostly white urban ground, covered with flour. With its flour coating; gritty, gray swirls from uncovered pavement, and speckled gold from egg yolks, this urban surface suddenly appears as an exceptionally painterly ground, indeed as an abstract painting altogether; jetting and billowing flour makes things even more painterly. Partially obscured by the opaque white clouds drifting about them, several people in their costumes stand or stride about, sometimes shooting one another with flour. Unless you are one of the relatively few outsiders who happen to know quite a lot about El Enfarinats, it is impossible to make rational sense of this odd image, which is fine. Here is where the known world ends and a different one, governed by a totally alternative logic, temporarily takes over. Precisely because Korfmann isolates this scene from any context or understandable narrative, it becomes dreamlike, mysterious, and elusive. You are looking at a photograph of a festival in a small Spanish town, but you could be looking at a film still or theater set; a modern version of a smoky battle scene by Goya; a 21st century, highly mediated version of a 19th century Romantic painting (think of Caspar David Friedrich's sublime 1808 painting *Morning mist in the mountains*, with its abundant fog, or J.M.W. Turner's 1840 painting *San Salute in the Fog*), or a purely fantastical scene. Colors, textures, light, and painterly (although, once again, no paint was used) gestures are pronounced; Korfmann employs digital manipulation much as a painter uses brushstrokes, color, and gradations of paint thickness to affect the structure and composition of a work. Also, even though the events photographed occurred with much fun and good cheer, there is something quietly searing and harrowing about this work, with its intimations of battles and conflicts for real.

All of these works are good examples of how Katrin Korfmann seeks out, photographs from her unusual perspective, and then substantially alters ritualistic, eruptive, and transformative collective events when life, as the great Russian philosopher and literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin once put it, is suddenly and decisively “drawn out of its usual rut”: Indian people of all castes and ages flinging colors at one another; otherwise gravity-bound people climbing atop one another to astonishing heights; otherwise reasonable adults, now in goofy uniforms, attacking each other with flour and eggs, as they enact an ancient battle between chaotic exuberance and order, or throngs of people covered head to toe in black paint, as happens with the Fiesta de Cascamorras, spanning two small towns, Baza and Guadix, in Spain’s province of Granada. For three days in September Baza is totally transformed by a festival dating to the late 15th century and the Reconquest of Muslim Granada by the Christian forces of King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella of Castile. Way back then, as the story goes, a new Catholic church was being constructed in Baza on the site of a former Mozarabic chapel (the Mozarabs were Iberian Christians living in Muslim Andalusia for centuries.) During construction, a worker from Guadix heard a voice from underground calling out, “Have mercy!” On that spot, he found a statue of the Virgin, which was named Virgen de la Piedad (Our Lady of Mercy), and wanted to spirit it away to his hometown, but the people of Baza violently objected, claiming the icon as their own, since it was found in their town. This fierce conflict between villages was later resolved when the court stepped in, with a compromise solution. The icon would remain in Baza, but each year Guadix could hold a religious celebration. During the celebration, if a Guadix resident could make it to the Church of Mercy in Baza unstained, he would have the right to take the statue back to his hometown. Thus, each year on September 6, the principal figure Cascamorras, dressed absurdly as a harlequin and accompanied by townspeople from Guadix, attempts to make it to Baza unsullied, but he is always repelled, since the people of Baza are fully armed with copious black paint to be flung at him, in the process coating much of the town (nowadays, many buildings are judiciously covered in protective plastic.) Religiosity and buffoonery, spirit and body, the sacred and the profane have long been central to this festival, but over time it has become even more secular: this religious festival has long since segued into an unfettered community party/rave where revelry rules and everyone gets covered with black paint.

With Korfmann’s Cascamorras, seamlessly composed from several different photographs, her hybrid painting sans paint is especially apparent. The ground is streaked with black drips and swirls, perhaps with a nod to Jackson Pollock’s drip paintings and Franz Kline’s abstract black paintings, but it goes much further than that. Multiple black, gray, brown, and lighter tones make the ground especially active, while scattered bits of color from clothing and debris increase the visual complexity, and act as surrogate brushstrokes. This little patch of a town also crosses over into rugged topography, perhaps with volcanic eruptions, making everything seem like a vast, convulsive region. On this altered ground, in a small space that suddenly seems immense, upright young people covered in black paint, some applying black paint to others, are contemporary revelers, yet Korfmann’s work doesn’t really communicate revelry at all. From the sprawling chaos of a messy festival on the loose, she crafted a curiously solemn work that is simultaneously gorgeous and coarse.

I mentioned Mikhail Bakhtin, and it is worth considering him a bit further, specifically his theory of the carnival, which he applied to literature (especially to Dostoevsky’s novels) but which can also be fruitfully applied elsewhere, for instance to certain kinds of visual art. According to Bakhtin, the “carnivalized moment” or the “carnivalized situation” are those moments when the familiar rules, values, hierarchies, and modes of apprehension are temporarily suspended in favor of a brand new freedom, which can be simultaneously exhilarating and unruly, bewildering and liberating. These carnivalized moments do not seek to transcend normal life; they don’t try to substitute a keen new consciousness for an

enervated one. Instead, for Bakhtin, both mundane and carnivalized life exist together, and one moves between the two, entering the carnivalized situation in order to be tested and transformed and then returning to one's normal life—perhaps shaken, perhaps deepened with some of the wisdom that one gained.

I'm not suggesting that Korfmann is somehow beholden to Bakhtin, or that she has even read his work: maybe so and maybe not. I am suggesting that an eccentric carnival impulse—one which involves transformation and buffoonery, which, in Bakhtin's terms, "combines the sacred with the profane, the lofty with the low, the great with the insignificant, the wise with the stupid" and which, with its free-spirited play and adventure temporarily replaces normal life with its rules, categories, hierarchies, and stratification—is important in her work, and indeed is a major reason why her composite photographs are so unusual and compelling. The festivals and spectacles that Korfmann photographs involve costumes, masks, fluid identities, anarchic vitality, communal activities, considerable freedom, and at times eroticism—all staples of the carnival. What's especially fascinating is how she carnivalizes the carnival, so to speak, and further transforms what is already transformational. Some of her very believable figures are actually combinations of different people; one person's ears or eyes may well appear on another person's head. Already visually excessive scenes become even more so because of how Korfmann adds to and intensifies the colors and dynamics. With several works, festivals famous for huge crowds become just a smattering of people in eventful, but oftentimes mysterious, settings. In one case, Korfmann's photograph *Wen ji qi wu*, she invented a festival altogether, purported to take place each year in Xiamen, China. While a resident at CEAC (Chinese European Art Center), she worked with dance students from Xiamen University and their professor, designing special costumes made from traditional Chinese fabric and choreographing a dance shaped according to the Chinese characters for wealth and happiness. In red frocks and black leggings, performers dance upon a stone floor strewn with red and golden Easter eggs, but they also appear to be miraculously flying. This rigorously crafted photograph is magical and frankly beatific. It is also convincing, capturing a "fake" ritual that merges the European tradition of collecting colored, hard-boiled eggs at Easter with traditional Chinese dance. When initially presented at an exhibition in Xiamen, along with an invented, but allegedly truthful, explanatory account, numerous Chinese viewers were certain that the ritual is real. During the Cultural Revolution many such rituals were suppressed, but now they are returning, oftentimes with government approval and support, in part because of their value as tourist attractions.

The Boryeong Mud Festival in Boryeong (also called Daecheon), South Korea, is not old and does not have religious roots. Instead it was invented in 1998 as a public relations stunt designed to hawk a line of cosmetics made from local mud as well as to attract tourists to the seaside area. The festival has since become wildly popular. Some three million visitors descend on Boryeong each summer to enjoy mud baths, mud wrestling, military style exercises, mud sliding, and a "mud fireworks fantasy," according to the website. No doubt a major lure is the opportunity to frolic in mud, publically bask in sensuality, and celebrate the body's appetites—this in a culture where there are often strict rules governing gender, bodies, and behavior.

Again photographing from on high and eliminating the surrounding context, Korfmann's near-monochromatic photograph *Mud* (which is the most minimal work in the series) pares things down to just a few bathers, not really in a mud pool but in a large expanse of mud, which once again looks exceptionally painterly, as well as primal. There is something extremely lovely, but also haunting, about these bathers, who are emerging from, and gathered by, the fluid mud. You think of baptisms and supplicants, of ritual tries for purification, but also of mortality and loss. Some of the figures are vivid; others are half-apparitional, almost vaporous, as they merge with the earth. Contemplative (sometimes painful) solitude, eroticism, and physical conflict coexist, in a wholly fictive work that dislocates and juxtaposes extracts

from several different photographs. This work is also wonderfully mobile in time. Bas-relief sculptures from centuries ago, Renaissance paintings, and aerial surveillance photographs from this era are just a few of its possible references.

Once again, this work is a total fiction, involving dislocation, recombination, and redirection. Two mud wrestlers in the middle, devoid of onlookers, are isolated in their intimate struggle, and while recognizably contemporary, they also seem ancient and iconic, like wrestlers on a Greek urn. Near the bottom, a couple is entwined in an amorous embrace. A group of five people huddle together, as if in prayer. Some figures seem thoughtful; others seem anguished. Everywhere the gray-brown mud, with soft green tones and scattered white drips, is downright enthralling; it's at once yielding and seething, placid and severe. It almost seems sentient, a living, thinking organism, like the otherworldly ocean in Andrei Tarkovsky's great film *Solaris*. There is such humanity in Korfmann's radical version of a corporate and government fueled mud festival that attracts millions. Communion and loneliness, connection and alienation, repose and consternation, society and nature all come together in this ceremonial, meticulously composed work that also feels ardent and raw. Exploring far-flung groups of people in collective transformation, and doing so with curiosity, amazement, and aesthetic risk, Katrin Korfmann's adventurous new photographs are altogether soulful and compelling.

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1. <http://festivalofcolors.org>

2. All quotes from and references to Mikhail Bakhtin are from his *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, edited and translated by Caryl Emerson, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1984, pp. 122-124.