

The Inscrutable Charm of Isa Genzken, on View at MoMA

by Ben Davis 18/12/13 7:28 AM EST



Installation view of "Isa Genzken: Retrospective"

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Isa Genzken in her studio, 1982 /
Courtesy the artist and Galerie
Buchholz, Cologne/Berlin

For most visitors, the [current Isa Genzken](#) retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art is likely to be somewhat disorienting. The 65-year-old German artist is beloved by her peers and has been rediscovered as a godmother of today's generation of under-produced, funky-junky sculpture and installation — but she's [notoriously cagey](#) about herself, and this caginess comes through in her sculptures. On the one hand, this show conveys the clear impression of a forceful artistic sensibility. On the other, it is very hard to actually

distill that sensibility down to an essence, since she has been so willfully eclectic.

In the exhibition's first gallery, you encounter some long, narrow wooden pieces from the late 1970s known as "Hyperbolos" and "Ellipsoids": painted, machine-produced forms that lie on the floor. These are juxtaposed with proto-photoconceptualist works from the same period — blown-up ads for hi-fi stereos, whose sculptural qualities apparently intrigued the artist. In these works, Genzken finds personality in inscrutable industrial processes.

Experiments in various directions follow: rough concrete casts of ruined forms, set on plinths; resin sculptures of windows; a large, crisp photo of a woman's ear; concept-driven paintings made from squeegeeing over debris on her studio floor; X-ray photos of her own head in profile while she drinks, rendering her a festive skeleton; photographs documenting her trips to New York, at once diaristic and coldly formalizing.

Then, after all these swerves, Genzken undergoes a particularly clear transformation in the late '90s, starting with her "Gay Babies": small, beaten-up, vaguely anthropomorphic metal objects, strung together and sloppily spray-painted. At 50, the artist here finds her signature style of assemblage and goes on to create quirky maquette-like constructions and installations made of stuck-together bric-a-brac. It is as if Genzken has suddenly discovered a singular way of working that can contain her restless zigzag energy.

If you knew only the names of the most recent installations on view — *Empire/Vampire*, 2003/2004, *The American Room*, 2004, and *Ground Zero*, 2008 — you'd think she'd made a sharp political turn. And yet these loose-limbed installations are more conversational than propagandistic, formal exercises in artfully arranged messiness inspired by newsy topics. (For instance, the catalogue suggests that a chaotic cylindrical structure from her *Ground Zero* series, titled *Osama Fashion Store*, is about how its form resembles a turban. Huh?)



"Hospital (Ground Zero)" and "Disco Soon (Ground Zero)" [Courtesy the artist and Galerie Buchholz, Cologne/Berlin. © [Isa](#)

[Genzken](#)]

In the lead-up to the show, [an article from *Der Spiegel*](#) drew some attention for putting the artist's long-standing personal struggles with bipolar disorder and alcoholism in the spotlight. MoMA's presentation sticks to the better-known gossip: Genzken's time as a model, her student days in Düsseldorf, her marriage to painter [Gerhard Richter](#). Of course, a good tortured-artist story is great marketing, so the show's reticence about hers may have to do with Genzken insisting on her privacy.

Some awareness of this missing background is, in fact, illuminating — both positively and negatively. It throws into high relief the underlying themes that unite her works, specifically the sense of vulnerability seen, for instance, in Genzken's attachment to pathos-laden materials, whether in her early, half-formed concrete objects or her later, rickety constructions. (It also makes that X-ray of herself drinking rather chilling.) But a reluctance to talk about personal struggles might explain her oeuvre's intriguingly inscrutable character, as if the lived experience that held it all together was something that she was trying to reflect only indirectly. This note of aloofness, in fact, makes Genzken's messy contemporary work very classical in spirit, an example of the rhetoric of art being used to elevate us above the tangle of life.