

BERLIN

Quiet Horror, Cheerful Grin

TREY ABDELLA
"COLD FRONT"
KRAUPA-TUSKANY ZEIDLER
15 NOV 2025 – 18 FEB 2026

Perfectly timed with yuletide, the dense, tonally varied, mixed-media assemblages of Trey Abdella (*1994), of West Virginia, dangle a promise of festive cheer, only to expose the fickle, superficial sentiment that lies beneath. Even when he tones down his more cartoonish excess, and works in a more illustrative, realist mode — as in *A Little Birdie Told Me* (all works 2025), a beautifully rendered painting of a young boy whose face is obscured by an oversized pinecone — any hint of tenderness is stripped away by the seemingly random inclusion, in the center of the boy's eye, of a howling man. It's typical of the

artist, offering the comfort of familiar, mawkish imagery, only to crush it with nasty visual intrusions — often arriving so shockingly and so insidiously that it's impossible to find them funny.

Across the exhibition, warmth is repeatedly offered, then withdrawn, this tease at times conveyed by a dissonance between emotional expectation and the reality of what's depicted. The painting *Cold Hearted*, with its resin branches crawling across a foreground more oily than icy, is loaded with feel-good elements: a romantic couple, a warmly lit, snow-covered house. Yet it's

completely drained of genuine feeling, not least by their stilted and unconvincing embrace, the woman's arms fixed like a mannequin's. Sentiment appears so thoroughly manufactured that intimacy itself is frozen out.

Abdella frequently combines found objects, consumer items, and digital elements in his painting-sculptural hybrids, as in the 3D assemblage *Outdoor Cat*, stacked with flashy content: a noisy hologram of Jerry the Cat, a pine tree, and two animatronic rabbits with slow, oscillating heads. All of it sits on a chunky shelf that juts into the gallery space like a dismal shop-vitrine display, the gizmos only intensifying its sense of vacancy. Above, from a window set into white vinyl siding, with an arrow-pierced heart drawn into its frosted pane, a painted



When Hell Freezes Over, 2025
 Acrylic, foam, wood, fiberglass, resin, aqua resin, AC motor, ball bearing, metallic tinsel, led lights, transparent display, fake plants, motion sensor, epoxy clay, epoxy paste, and armature wire, 154 x 320 x 128 cm

Left: *Thin Ice*, 2025, acrylic, fiberglass, plastic, foam, resin, denim, fake plants, beads, and various found objects on wood panel, 205 x 153 x 40 cm. Right: *Outdoor Cat*, 2025, acrylic, foam, resin, epoxy clay, broken ceramic angels, 3d hologram fan, Christmas tree, fake bird, fake plants, and animatronic rabbits on wood panel, 206 x 153 x 69 cm



Courtesy: the artist and Kraupa-Tuskany Zeidler. Photos: Julian Blum



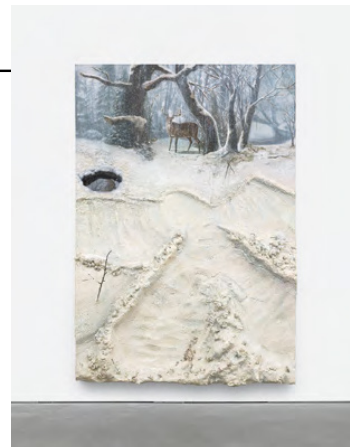
A Little Birdie Told Me, 2025, acrylic, epoxy paste, lenticular print on linen, 203 x 153 x 5 cm

couple takes in the scene outside, smiling cringily, looking utterly deranged.

Distraction becomes more ludicrous and overbearing still in *Run, Run as Fast as You Can*, where a giant resin gingerbread man protrudes thickly from the painting's surface, smothering the image beneath. The comforting American tradition of dipping the holiday cookie in milk, pinched between an enormous thumb and forefinger, obscures the tradwife figure standing at the kitchen island with a hot casserole, as much the leering child plunging a knife into a table, his face distorted through the curve of the glass. It's one of the strongest works in the show, fusing hyperrealism with a sinister, dream-like unpredictability, the scene lent an all the more disquieting edge by the gingerbread man's cheerful grin.

Abdella reveals in these ambiguous tableaux, allowing hyperbolic scenes and narratives to surface from the quiet horror of domestic life. Yet for all their cinematic puerility – their playful, even oafish exuberance – the works remain stubbornly difficult to pin down. Like off-color jokes told in private, you feel a pressure to understand, even when the punchline remains stubbornly out of reach.

Although there is nothing especially new in his approach, what singles him out is a finely balanced tonality: sincerity undermined, beauty corrupted, charm cacklingly undercut. Nothing is allowed to remain pure, whether through the artist's constant teasing or



the viewer's uneasy suspense. This is especially true in *When Hell Freezes Over*, a brilliantly silly, mechanized sculpture that combines, on one side, the faux warmth of a grossly oversized log fire – note that it's slowly engulfing a wooden house – with, on its twinkling obverse, a diorama of aching mundanity: a man shoveling snow, a Bambi-like fawn, the ground speckled with birds' eggs. Suburbia and the inferno are not so far apart, and from the look of things, hellfire is the more appealing.

One painting is more restrained than the others, notable for the absence of human figures – or rather, for having only the impression of one. In *Snow Angels*, a literal snow angel has been swooshed out of the snow, its gloopy-paint surface thickened with glass beads and, here and there, doll heads. Above it, a brown stag stands in majestic isolation in front of a row of trees, completing a scene that wouldn't be out of place on a tacky Christmas card, perhaps covered in glitter. So, then: where's the obnoxious detail? The consumerist grotesque, the morbid kitsch? You find yourself scanning the painting, looking for some insidious intrusion. But perhaps that corrosive expectation alone is enough. Surrounded by such relentless instability, we can't even indulge in a bit of outright schmaltz.

Duncan Ballantyne-Way

Snow Angels, 2025, acrylic, epoxy clay, broken ceramic angels, lenticular print, foam, aqua resin, glitter, plastic, on wood panel, 254 x 178 x 70 cm