# Matthias Franz

## *die dünne Haut der Zivilisation*

September 9 - October 31, 2026
GRIMM, 54 White Street, New York, NY (US)



Matthias Franz | *die dünne Haut der Zivilisation (2)*, 2026

**GRIMM is pleased to announce *die dünne Haut der Zivilisation*, a solo exhibition of new works by German artist Matthias Franz (b. 1984, Ilmenau, DE) on view at the New York gallery from September 9 – October 31, 2026.**

In these new works, Matthias Franz returns to history as a means of storytelling. Through *die dünne Haut der Zivilisation*, Franz considers how our understanding of the past might become a means of comprehending the present. The exhibition title, which translates as *The Thin Skin of Civilization*, points to Franz's examination of the ideals and underlying structures that sustain civilized society. Drawing upon various literary and textual sources, he uses painting as a tool to visualize and question the world around us.

Ambiguous landscapes and enigmatic interiors feature in many of Franz's paintings. They are scenes, unstated, where subjects contest for focus. Within these uncanny spaces, familiar figures are displaced, drifting across vast oceans or emerging among dense jungle foliage. In the *die Aufklärung* works, cloaked figures are depicted floating on a yellow ocean; hues of turquoise and burnt umber patinate the canvas, as they clutch hold of lights guiding their way in a multitude of directions. In the center, above an archaic-looking passenger boat, a hovering figure dressed in a Napoleonic uniform salutes upwards, levitating in the air as if suspended in some kind of cosmic veneration. The title, which translates as *Enlightenment*, stands in tension with the autocratic figure who embodies military expansion. Through this paradox, Franz alludes to the power dynamics that have shaped the past and suggests a broader sense of societal disenchantment that remains unsettlingly relevant today.

Vestiges of the past continue to populate Franz's works. In *the Luddite Kids Club* works, a dominant architectural tower or viewing platform that loosely takes the form of an abandoned bandstand is pictured. Children gaze upwards at an uninhabited platform crowded with instruments. The tower appears to offer a space for communal gathering, creation and performance, yet remains empty and inaccessible, its onlookers held at a distance, reduced to silent spectators before the instruments. This tension is reinforced through Franz's reference to the Luddite movement, a nineteenth-century rebellion of English textile workers. Rather than rejecting technological innovation outright, the Luddites were concerned with the conditions under which it was introduced, questioning whether it enhanced or diminished the dignity of everyday life and social relations. Here, Franz invites us to reconsider the relationship between past and present, reflecting the continuing artistic struggle for creative autonomy in an age of technological changes and advancement.

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*retro Ecstasy (1)* and *(2)* are a nod to the oeuvre of Norbert Schwontkowski, an artist Franz is indebted to and whose work he admires. In these paintings, an absurdist and surreal scene plays out, with furniture and portraits moved around what could be Stately Galleries. Fragile scaffolding is used to re-hang portraits of men who might currently be in power, or no longer be, if they ever were. The paintings evoke the instability of historical narratives, where figures and symbols of authority can be rearranged, displaced and reconsidered.

For Franz, paintings act as portals, opening up the space to connect things, whilst questioning what we already know. In *Hamlet2026 (1)* and *(2)*, typewriters perched upon tables with pieces of paper flopping comically over the top alludes to questions of creative authorship. A reference to the famous 16th-century play written by English playwright William Shakespeare, Franz invokes Shakespeare's most famously feigned madman, Hamlet, whose name appears emblazoned across the typewriter like a logo. Fraught with revenge, Hamlet's perceived madness gave him a free rein to speak truths that would be otherwise heavily scrutinized were he visibly sane. In a comical play on this, the almost broken typewriter embellished with the name of Hamlet illustrates how truths can emerge in madness and visual translation, generally speaking, as both a creative and literary process, inevitably distorts meanings.

The question, then, is how painting can become a space in which seemingly disparate histories, images and ideas are brought into relation. Franz's paintings thrive on the collision of opposing motifs and emotional states, distinguished by their ability to propel us back and forth between past and present, and into a surreal dreamscape where nothing is ever quite as it seems.

**About the artist**

Matthias Franz (b. 1984, Ilmenau, DE) graduated from the Academy of Fine Arts Vienna in 2019, where he was a student of Daniel Richter. Selected exhibitions include *claim no easy victories*, GRIMM, London (UK); *Sensory Dialogue*, with Daniel Richter, Yi Space, Hangzhou (CN); *Birds Sing the Echoes of Fragmentation*, GRIMM, Amsterdam (NL); *The Moon and I*, GRIMM, New York, NY (US); *AIR 2020 / 2021*, Galerie Krinzinger, Vienna (AT); *Salon des Nutzlosen*, GRIMM, New York, NY (US); and *Condition Humaine*, GRIMM, New York, NY (US).

Franz's work can be found in the Rachofsky Collection, Dallas, TX (US); Beth Rudin DeWoody Collection, Palm Beach, FL (US); De Heus-Zomer Collection, Barneveld (NL); THE EKARD COLLECTION; Green Family Art Foundation, Dallas, TX (US); Kunstmuseum, The Hague (NL); The He Art Museum, Foshan (CN); and the David and Indrė Roberts Collection, London (UK), as well as numerous private collections.



Matthias Franz, 2023 | Photo by Jonathan de Waart

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