

STEFAN KÜRTE

ALEXANDER AND BONIN

Looking at Stefan Kürten's painting *Long Time Now*, 2002, I suddenly thought of an old children's-book illustration for a long-unremembered nursery rhyme: "Little Jack Horner sat in a corner, / Eating his Christmas pie"—that one. The artist had imagined a small boy sitting scrunched on the floor in a corner, gazing wonderingly at a pie he held on his lap. Though the child was brightly lit, the room's walls, towering above him, rose up in shadowy darkness—and they were covered with the wildest wallpaper, a universe of magical symbols and signs. Even now I love that picture: Surrounded by intimations of the enormous world, wide, various, and not completely safe, the boy is yet intent on immediate pleasures and nourishments, if a little awed by them as well.

Long Time Now shows a familiar kind of interior, a modernist living room. In a style once radical and now commonplace in suburbia, the house has glass walls; we are looking into the junction of two of

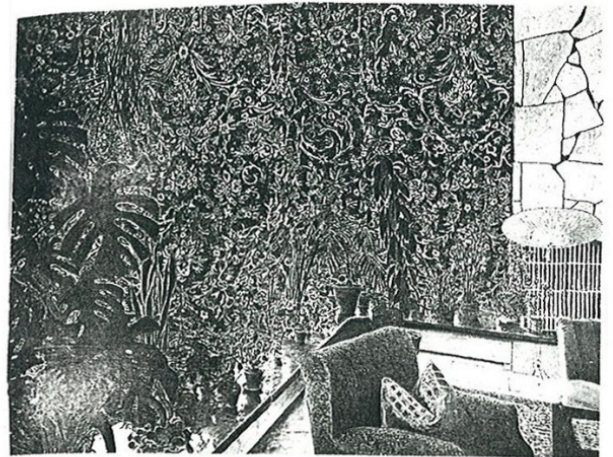
them, a corner comfortably furnished with armchairs, a rug, a designer lamp. The stretch of glass is framed on the right by a panel of crazy-paving masonry (part of a fireplace, maybe) and on the left by the dark leaves of a big philodendron—one of several potted plants lined up on a wide sill at floor level under the window. The plants rise up . . . and up . . . and utterly fill the glass with pattern and color. Actually, some of this must be outside, the greenery indoors fusing visually with the blossom and foliage in the garden; but in the painting's odd space (the spread of flowers is a flat wall, though there's a ninety-degree angle in there somewhere) the two are indistinguishable. As in the Little Jack Horner illustration, a deliriously wild nature watches over an island of comfort, revealing it as funny, fragile, and dear.

Pattern and color, organic form, and the processes of growth and decay appear here as a return of the repressed, a ghost in the machine—a ghost in the ideal rectangular geometries of modernist architecture. Similarly, in *Forever Now*, 2001, the wanness of a present-day city street is set off by a florid deep blue sky full of curlicues and whorls that Kürten must have lifted from van Gogh. In several other paintings the sky is a featureless plane, but the plane is gold, evoking not the Miesian houses and corporate atria depicted beneath them but Byzantine or Russian icons and the religious art of medieval Europe. That golden sky reappears in one of the show's best works, the nearly nine-foot-wide *Perfect Day*, 2001–2002, which shows a country house and its busily verdant garden. A purple butterfly chair among the shrubs marks the house as a place of leisure and urban

escape, the city's complement, but at the same time a fairy-tale, Hansel-and-Gretel quality emerges from this subtly lunatic landscape, as if the plot were stranger than those who lived in it dreamed.

If Kürten were merely satirizing the last century's architecture, that job has surely been done before. In any case, not all of the moderns so rigidly suppressed the outdoors; indeed Kürten's meld of indoor and outdoor gardens in *Long Time Now* has a precise analogue in Mies van der Rohe's 1928–30 Tugendhat House, in Brno, where a conservatory between glass walls produces the same humane confusion. The strength of Kürten's paintings is less their unraveling of the limitations of the built world than their sense of the spacious mysteries surrounding it.

—David Frankel



Stefan Kürten, *Long Time Now*, 2002,
oil on canvas, 57 x 75".