A canvas the size of a cinema screen, the German artist Jonas Burgert’s *Viechlast* (2020) depicts the aftermath of a collision between two helicopters, one yellow with waspish black stripes, the other a bright, fire-engine red. Looking at this epic work—whose lineage we might trace back to such great disaster paintings of the Romantic era as Théodore Géricault’s *The Raft of the Medusa* (1818-19) and Caspar David Friedrich’s *The Wreck of Hope* (1823-1824)—our instinct is twofold. We ask ourselves what caused this catastrophic event (a question *Viechlast* never quite answers), and who, if anyone, survived.

Things certainly look pretty terminal for whoever was flying in the yellow helicopter, which has crash-landed on its nose, its stilled blades misted with dark sprays of blood. The red helicopter’s passengers—a menagerie of white-pelted animals, including dogs, sheep and a muscular horse—have met what might be an even crueler fate. On impact, their bodies seem to have been compacted into a single, pale mass, from which emerges a panoply of tails, paws and hooves, some of them dangling limply, others twitching in agony, or sheer astonished disbelief.

Various humanoids attend the crash-site. Swaddled in loose blue ribbons, a purple-skinned androgyne performs an ambiguous ritual (the last rites, a thanksgiving to some beneficent sky god?) over the downed aircraft, while a figure sporting a green turban holds a huge ant aloft, as though it were a precious infant saved from the wreckage, or a prized delicacy to be served up at a celebratory feast. Gremlin-like children clamber over the busted machinery, mischievous smiles playing across their lips, and at the top left of the composition, a man in a loin cloth lies among the debris, his eyes closed in either death, or sleep. Near the center of the painting, a woman sits on a worn sofa, staring out impassively at the viewer. She appears untroubled by the body that has sunk, shoulders first, into the stretch of patterned flooring by her right foot. We’re left to wonder whether this is the corpse of one of the helicopters’ passengers, fallen from the sky, or whether this might be an observer who recognized that the crash was imminent, and responded with ostrich logic, burying his head in the ground in the belief that if he couldn’t see the calamity unfold, then it wouldn’t impinge on his reality.

There are so many weird and wonderful figures teeming across the surface of *Viechlast* that it’s easy to overlook the strangeness of its setting. On the painting’s periphery, several elements conspire to confuse our sense of scale: a gigantic brass belt buckle, a huge yellow flower, great broken slabs of plywood. Are the helicopters in fact toys that have been deliberately smashed into a dolls’ house, by some unseen child-god? If so, why then do the people and animals in the scene feel so organic, so vital, so driven by their own, unknowable desires, and why is the surface of the work enlivened with marks that resemble both drifts of delicate blossom, and the spatters of pigment that gather on a painter’s studio floor? *Viechlast* is a work that combines a number of very different registers, from the meticulously detailed realism of the face of the woman sitting on the sofa, to the tangle of objects on the far left of the canvas (are they skulls, spines, hunks of twisted metal?), which seem to be deliquescing into near-abstraction. What is remarkable about Burgert’s image of disaster is not only its size, or its endless narrative and pictorial ambiguities, or the way its adroitly marshalled horizontal composition pulses like a jagged line on a heart monitor, but also how the artist insists that the multiple possibilities offered up by his medium might be deployed all at once, without fear of contradicting each other or cancelling each other out. Rather—and as he demonstrates—in the right hands, paint will always speak to paint.

The spaces and figures that Burgert depicts are, of course, fantastical, but it does not follow that his work belongs to the fantasy genre. Unlike, say, J.R.R. Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* (1954-55)—and its countless literary, cinematic, and televisual antecedents—his paintings, drawings and sculptures don’t tell what we’d recognize as a coherent tale, nor do they attempt to build an internally consistent fictional realm. Equally unhelpful are comparisons to such art historical figures as Hieronymus Bosch (1450-1516) and William Blake (1757-1857), whose visionary practices were, in their very different ways, both steeped in Christianity, and demand a familiarity with that faith’s lore and symbolism if they are to yield up their meaning. Significantly, Burgert refuses to provide us with a backstory to the people and places that make up his imagined world, and insists that the motifs that he repeatedly returns to—among them ribbons, sticks, chequerboard patterns and blooming foliage—are not emblems to be decoded, but rather useful formal devices, which serve to structure his images and objects. (A ribbon, for example, is a flat surface that can manipulated to give the illusion of dimensionality). While on a visual level his work is a riot of unruly incident, on a conceptual level he is, at heart, a minimalist. He does not require his audience to have knowledge of any particular cultural tradition, or to be versed in this or that episode from (art) history. Rather, what he asks of us is to consider what it means to be human, in the barest, most fundamental sense.

*Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?* These urgent questions formed the title of a work by the French Post-Impressionist Paul Gauguin, which he completed in 1898. Over a century and a quarter later, humanity is still looking for the answers, and if we somehow navigate our present environmental crises, and emerge into a better future, our descendants will continue to worry away at the intractable nature of being. Gauguin’s questions also seem to be perennially on the lips of the figures in Burgert’s paintings, who appear to exist somewhere outside linear time and logical space, yet nevertheless meet our gaze, and attempt to forge a connection with us, their fleshy counterparts. In *sinnwild* (2024), a young woman stands on a cuboid stone pedestal, her legs crossed at the ankle, her hands holding a pair of ribbon-tipped sticks behind her back, forming an ‘X’ that echoes the twin floral sashes than run from her shoulders to her hips. Behind her, a wall appears to be shedding square purple tiles, while cherry red blooms climb ever higher up its surface. As if in sympathy, the young woman’s dress is beginning to fray at the hem, triangles of its tessellated orange fabric falling at her feet, and their colour leaching into the stonework of the plinth. We might detect a contrast, here, between rigid, lifeless masonry and fecund, chaotically flourishing organic matter, between the ideal forms of geometry and the world as it actually manifests itself. Roughly translated, the work’s title (which Burgert also gave to his solo exhibition) means something like ‘wild sense’. ‘Sinnwild’ is a portmanteau term, which does not exist in formal German. Still, it is one that we intuitively grasp, suggesting as it does something feral and free beneath conscious thought, a flashing memory of the animal part of ourselves that we’re so often persuaded to forget.

In his memoir *Speak, Memory* (1951), the Russian novelist Vladimir Nabokov writes that ‘The cradle rocks above an abyss, and common sense tells us that our existence is but a brief crack of light between two eternities of darkness.’ These words come to mind when we’re confronted with Burgert’s painting *Feinschleich* (2022), an image of a pair of children sitting on a square stone slab, which levitates in what seems to be an infinite black void. The older child, a girl, suspends a length of pink thread between her outstretched hands, using it to trap a green wasp, who has a mammalian skull in place of a living, insectoid head. On the children’s tiny platform crowd vases of wilting flowers, white walrus bones, and a grey rag whose folds suggest a ghostly, cadaverous visage. Preoccupied with catching her buzzing quarry, whose fate mirrors her own entrapment, the girl ignores the surrounding dark. In contrast, the boy (an Adam-figure to her Eve?) stares down into the abyss, holding what looks like a pipe to his lips. Is he attempting to inhale the endless black nothingness, absorbing it into his tiny, fragile body, or is he sounding a musical note, which will echo into eternity? Perhaps he is trying to attract the attention of whatever force set him and his companion adrift on their slab—an object that is at once a life raft, a prison ship, and a floating tomb. Is there anybody out there? The truth is, we don’t know.

We might wonder how Burgert’s figures imagine the world in which they exist, what line they draw between reality and illusion. In *Duldung* (2022), a man rests closed-eyed by a broken window, his head overgrown with white wildflowers, as though he’s been slumbering for months, years, like the protagonist of the fairytale *Sleeping Beauty*. Trapped inside his head, whatever dreams screen in the projection room of his mind are inaccessible to us. The painting *reib Hauch auch* (2023) is also concerned with the denial of visual experience. Here, a blind man fumbles with a clutch of pink blooms, whose form he can touch but whose colours he can never see, or perhaps even conceptualize. Unbeknownst to him, the sleeves of his sombre grey suit have become caked with bright pigment, as though the flowers were somehow gifting him their hues, pollinating him with their chromatic energy. Is *reib Hauch auch* a tragic image (the blind man will, after all, remain ignorant of this boon, if boon it is)? Perhaps, although I prefer to think that it’s a meditation on the fact that the world will always be bigger, more colourful, and more complex than we’ll ever know—that it will act on us, and through us, in ways we cannot conceive. To understand this is to understand something precious about our shared humanity, and about what it is to make art.

Significantly, Burgert has said that ‘illusion is not a pure fiction that has nothing to do with us; it is part of our reality’. While his paintings and drawings are, in a sense, windows on to a fictional world, his sculptures are a different prospect. They stand on the same ground as we do, cast their shadows under the same lights as our own bodies. Looking at a patinated bronze work such as *Stück blieb* (2023), a female torso swathed in flowing fabric whose closed eyes and beatific expression suggest a state of internal bliss, it’s tempting to fantasize that she is an ambassador sent from Burgert’s painted realm, where time seems to hang suspended, and objects and space appear infinitely mutable. What knowledge might she trade with us? What wisdom might she impart?