

## New Home for Art

**Creative, exciting and steeped in history: more and more young artists from the United States are living and working in Berlin**



Matt Saunders's favourite place in Berlin is the Wohnzimmer. Literally the "living room", it's a café-cum-bar in retro-look located at Helmholtzplatz in the heart of Prenzlauer Berg. An 'in' place eagerly frequented by tourists with their Lonely Planet guide book, students and scene folk.

From midday onwards, you can sip your latte macchiato or drink Beck's beer till late at night, overlooking the square that has become even more popular since the launching of Andreas Dresen's film Sommer vorm Balkon. Saunders is an artist from New York who lives with his partner Katarina Burin, a Canadian artist, in an apartment in this particular corner of the city. The 30-year-old artist came to Berlin on a one-way ticket three years ago. He's so enthusiastic about the city that wild horses couldn't drag him away at the moment: "Berlin is a melting pot full of interesting people from all over the world. I can easily live and work here on a really low budget. In New York I'd need several jobs to survive, and I'd have hardly any time for my art. The only drawback is that people are constantly coming and going. Berlin's a bit like a continuous-flow water heater." Katarina Burin nods.

Many Americans share their sentiments. According to official figures, some 12,000 US citizens currently live in Berlin – most of them are artists and intellectuals, almost 2,500 more than in 1995. Some estimates reckon there are as many as 20,000 people from the United States in the city, but a lot of them are still registered with their main abode in their home country. After the fall of the Iron Curtain, the eastern European cities of Prague and Budapest were particularly trendy, for a few years now it's been Berlin.

It's not surprising that so many people are curious to discover the city: it's easy for visitors to get a three-month visa. Artists who want to live and work in Berlin for two years can do this with the aid of a visa for which they need to document their artistic work. Another possibility for them is to come to the city through the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD), or the Fulbright foundation. "American students like coming to Germany," says Reiner Rohr, head of the DAAD American programme and section head at the Fulbright Commission. "Scholarships from the Fulbright Commission and other agencies are becoming increasingly attractive because, from the American perspective, they offer not only good conditions for study but also solid financing and good personal support. Berlin tops the list of the cities where students would like to go, partly because of the diversity in the university scene and, of course, because of the huge cultural opportunities." Freedom, lightheartedness, low living expenses and a stimulating life in an interesting city are all items that recur on the popularity list.

### **Katarina Burin: "It often takes time to get into a conversation, but with a bit of patience deep friendships can develop"**

Matt Saunders was first in Berlin in 2001 to do research on German film. The city obviously appealed to him, because he and Katarina decided to settle here together. He says many of his fellow students and friends have stayed in New York, but he and his partner wanted to get out of the art scene there. They wanted to try something new and gain different perspectives by changing their environment. "In Berlin we can live more anonymously. And getting to know people is easy." They love the faded charm of the eastern part of the city, for instance the gingerbread style of the former GDR showcase boulevard Karl Marx Allee. And there are plenty of international contacts in the city, for instance, at the previews of innumerable galleries in the district of Mitte, where they can exchange views and ideas with colleagues from around the globe – and with Germans, of course. "The discussions here are different from those in the States. Conversations with Germans often take a bit longer to get going, but they are less superficial once they get off the ground, and with a bit of patience deep friendships can develop," says Katarina Burin. And she adds that neither of them necessarily needed to learn the language, "because a lot of people want to talk with us in English." But they not only value the ease of communication, they also enjoy the easy accessibility of other European cities which are quick and cheap to reach. That's a big advantage, so they've already been to Vienna, London and Amsterdam, eastern European and east German cities, where the eastern bloc style of architecture is still so visible. But Katarina says Berlin is also bursting with history creating "impressions that flow into and influence our art".

Although both of them go back to the Big Apple only three times a year, they've still kept up their contacts in the city. Their gallery, Grimm Rosenfeld, in Munich and New York, exhibits Saunders' drawings and paintings which are influenced by German film and the movie and theatre directors Rainer Werner Fassbinder or Christoph Schlingensief. And that's where Katarina Burin also shows her paintings, collages and sculptures, reflecting existing or destroyed motifs, such as Berlin's city palace or buildings by Josef Hoffmann and Adolf Loos. They're each fortunate enough to be able to live from the sales of their works and can even finance a studio close to where they live. Katarina Burin works with other artists and designers in a one-time cigarette factory in the 'in' district Mitte, while Matt Saunders works in a one-room flat with a coal-fired stove in Prenzlauer Berg. They love the summer, when they can saunter through the parks, sit outside at cafés and bars or simply ride bicycles through the city. "The atmosphere is very relaxed," says Katarina. But they probably won't become accustomed to the somewhat grumpy neighbours – born and bred Berliners – who don't greet them on the stairs.

### **John von Bergen: "I love this city's positive energy. It's a bit like New York in the 60s or 80s"**

John von Bergen has been in Berlin for two-and-a-half years and the city has become his home. The 34-year-old New Yorker who studied illustration came to the city because of love. He works in a big studio in an old factory building in Friedrichshain, a popular eastern district, not far from Simon Dach Strasse, which is studded with one bar after another. This is where he created his pencil drawings alluding to organic forms which he exhibited in New York, Düsseldorf, Cologne, Mannheim, Frankfurt am Main and in Berlin. In fall, a show is planned in Düsseldorf. Like Saunders and Burin, von Bergen is able to live from his art. That's a reason for him to stay "even though the economic situation in Germany is not all that rosy. But I like the positive energy of this city. It's a bit like New York in the 60s or 80s. Things are happening

here at the moment."

Helen Mirra doesn't have to worry about her financial situation either. The 35-year-old minimal and concept artist, and assistant professor at Harvard University, arrived in Berlin in July last year at the invitation of the DAAD. She's working in the areas of sculpture and text, exhibiting her work at the Kunsthalle Basel, the Kunstverein Hamburg and the 50th Biennale in Venice. In her studio in the heart of Grunewald there are stacks of Euro-pallets, which she paints in various shades of green. Or she works at her typewriter writing the indexes from various works, for instance by the American philosopher John Dewey. She types them onto coloured cotton ribbons ready for them to be hung on the walls of galleries and exhibitions, with her unconventional sound collages forming the acoustic backdrop. Although she works in a district surrounded by nature – "It's just crazy! Woodlands in the middle of a city" – Helen Mirra finds herself confronted with German history on a regular daily basis: the Nazi sculptor Arno Breker once worked on his sculptures in her current studio.

#### **Rollin Beamish: "I want to sense the city's historical, present-day, social and cultural identity"**

Rollin Beamish is equally receptive to the omnipresence of Berlin's century-old aura. The painter who taught painting and drawing at the University of Missouri in Columbia as assistant professor and has been living in Berlin as a Fulbright scholar since August 2005, says he came to Berlin in search of a social alternative to the "oil and money mentality" that he reckons has taken far too strong a hold on American society in recent years. At the same time the 28-year-old artist wants to sense the city's historical, present-day, social and cultural identity, and let it flow into his dynamic, brightly coloured, yet disconcerting pictures. "It's not so easy to discover all this, because I feel that, in contrast to say London or Madrid, Berlin still hasn't found its identity."

He is constantly surprised by the unusual tranquillity and spaciousness of the city. Beamish hopes that his stay will open up new horizons in his art. And to this purpose he works tirelessly in his living-room studio in the south of Neukölln. Apart from this, he keeps in close touch with his German professor, the well-known artist Katharina Grosse, as well as with students at the Weissensee art academy, which is taking care of him as a guest. He says that although he hasn't been living in the city for long, he's surprised at how many Turkish, Indian and foreign artists feel at home in Berlin without completely adopting a German lifestyle. "It's quite different in the USA," says Beamish. People assimilate there far more quickly.

Katy Scoggin from St. Louis also likes to focus on the different cultures in Berlin. She has a twelve-month Fulbright scholarship at the Technische Fachhochschule and is making a film about the situation of Turkish migrants in the capital. Her project concentrates on interviews with women: an asylum seeker, a Muslim woman, a Turkish lesbian, a career woman and an artist, all of whom she wants to question about their identities and their attitudes towards life. "As I'm a foreigner myself, it's not difficult to make contacts and find friends. I only start the camera rolling after I've built up a basis of trust," she says in her accent-free German which she acquired from numerous stays during her schooling and studies. When she isn't out and about in Kreuzberg and Neukölln, the quarters populated by Turkish migrants, the 25-year-old American likes to visit Berlin's museums, such as the Martin Gropius Building or Hamburger Bahnhof which specializes in contemporary art. She also has close contacts with the other Fulbright scholars. If she feels like dancing, she especially enjoys the oriental pop at SO 36, the club in Kreuzberg that became legendary in the 80s. She hardly ever feels homesick. But she does occasionally miss her Indian-American partner who is studying film. And that's a reason why she wants to move back to New York.

But until that happens, she often goes to the Wohnzimmer in Prenzlauer Berg, the same café as her artist colleagues Matt Saunders and Katarina Burin. Unlike Katy, the creative couple could well imagine staying on a while in Berlin. "Maybe another five years," says Katarina Burin. But judging by the way her partner Matt Saunders looks at her, it could even be a little longer than that. You just don't turn off a continuous-flow water heater all that quickly.

#### **Katja Winckler**

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