

Philipp Humm Renaissance and Catastrophe

Philipp Humm's Gesamtkunstwerk *The Last Faust* shines a black light on an age-old Germanic legend while simultaneously detailing the artist's own transition from businessman and tech maven to artist and filmmaker. – interviewed by Gareth Roberts

Shot over the long hot summer of 2018 *The Last Faust* is a re-imagining of Goethe's medieval parable of man's inevitable downfall in the face of satanic opportunity. Set in the not-to distant future, Faust is recast as Dr Goodfellow, a Silicon Valley billionaire who's meddling with artificial intelligence brings about the end of humankind. The film, starring British screen maverick Steven Berkoff, is the centrepiece of a vast body of work constructed by Humm over a period of 5 years and traverses multiple mediums including spectacularly energetic oil paintings, large format photography, sculptures, watercolours, sketches, and even a novella distilled from the movie's script.



Gretchen @ Philipp Humm



Philipp Humm Portrait @ Daniele Mah

Philipp Humm's renaissance began when he ditched a highly successful career in telecoms to forge a new life as artist and craftsman. Whilst not quite an autodidact, he studied briefly at the London Fine Arts Studio and the Academy of Art in Florence, his approach to learning is rigorous, a kickback from years as a captain of industry. We spoke to the artist in his north London studio to talk about his career switch and the thematic nature of his work. Unsurprisingly, we find him slumped over a Macbook framed inside a Zoom call that has become a ritual of life under the pandemic.

'I think some years back I got to a stage where I'd reached a point in my life where the zeal for business was waning and the creative part of me began to dominate. Ideas that had been swimming inside of me for decades began to break out. This is my second life and although I've always had a talent for drawing and painting, it's only in recent years that I've had the opportunity to work solely on my paintings.'



Humm's Gesamtkunstwerk (roughly translated, a total body of work) is the 5-years-in-the-making *The Last Faust*, 200 independent pieces in multiple mediums represents a detailed retelling of Goethe's Gothic epic *Faust*. While the folk allegory is well known (man sells his soul to the devil) to most, Humm also adapted and assimilated the lesser-known second book pertaining to the *Faust* legend. A massive undertaking.

'The *Last Faust* was ultimately an experiment, I wanted to see if it was possible to build a body of work that mined the Faustian legend. Goethe is Germany's most famous writer and *Faust* is an extraordinarily complex book. A kaleidoscope of philosophical, political and historical allegories freely interwoven into a magnum opus. I began by breaking it down into 40 scenes. I then prepared drawings of the text passages I had selected. This was the core for all that was to come. Visually, at this stage I was inspired by Dali and Paula Rego.'

'When it came to shooting the film, we had very little time and worked on two adjacent photographic studios rather than a conventional film set, this gave the film a very theatrical aspect. I worked with a professional film crew from Germany led by director Dominic Wischermann. We were punching out nearly 3 major scenes a day, a huge ask in terms of logistics. Thankfully I have pretty good management skills.'



Dancing Witch @ Philipp Humm

Released in 2020 as a full-length feature *The Last Faust* drew solid critical reviews and is likely to gain cult status as events depicted in the film increasingly chime with real life, albeit from a tech perspective rather than the diabolic element. The release next year of the German language version will likely garner further serious attention.

‘The German version for me feels like I’m bringing the movie home. If you read or watch Shakespeare in German it’s still Shakespeare, but a lot of the nuance is lost. The film felt incomplete without dubbing it into German. I found some very talented German actors who managed the incredibly difficult task of syncing their voices to the original cast. They did a phenomenal job actually.’



Above: Yin and Yang @ Philipp Humm
Right: The Spell @ Philipp Humm

Humm’s Gesamtkunstwerk (roughly translated, a total body of work) is the 5-years-in-the-making *The Last Faust*, 200 independent pieces in multiple mediums represents a detailed retelling of Goethe’s gothic epic *Faust*. While the folk allegory is well known (man sells his soul to the devil) to most, Humm also adapted and assimilated the lesser-known second book pertaining to the *Faust* legend. A massive undertaking.

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‘I think also over the past 16 months the pandemic has taught us that a global catastrophe is quite possible during our own lives and not just movie genre. We live in a world shadowed by nuclear, biological, and cyber weaponry, we’re stalked by the nightmarish possibilities presented by AI, quantum computing and robotics. Add to that, climate change and the volatility of western financial markets and you begin to wonder what, if any, chance humanity has.’



'When I was young the key global threat was thermo nuclear war between two superpowers, this still exists abut has been widened and magnified by increasing hostility with China, intolerance and the rise of the far right, the closing of borders and the internalising of supply chains rather than trading globally. Technology was supposed to save us, and it might still, but the people creating the technology are often blind to it's downside. When people say that something's 'going nuclear' you don't immediately think of clean energy.'

The release of the German version in 2022 may also be bookended by the possible stage production of The Last Faust, a feat previously considered unstageable as the second book demands such huge set-pieces and literally a cast of thousands. This endeavour, as ambitious as it seems, would close the circle of Humm's body of work by adding live theatre to an already all-encompassing canon.



Above: Split Personality @ Philipp Humm
Right: Split Personality II @ Philipp Humm

Goethe wrote Faust for the theatre. Book 1 has been produced as a play but Book 2 is a massive undertaking and basically adds about nine hours to the proceedings. The film compacts both books down to under two hours and this should be translatable to the stage. Seventy percent of the text will be lifted directly form Goethe's own text laid on top of the storyline I have constructed. It would also be interesting to collaborate with a professional theatre director on this, ideally in Germany, it seems the natural place to start, firstly as the audience will be more familiar with the original text, and secondly, German theatre leans towards the avant-garde and the experimental.'

Despite Humm's significant output his transition from his past self to future artist is ongoing, there are elements of business speak in his conversation that seems out of place with his art, although serious it's also surreal, witty, sexually charged and often anarchic.





Above: Baucis and Philamon @ Philipp Humm
 Below: The Ride @ Philipp Humm

'I think if you look at my work I'm lodged somewhere between the classical traditions of the Renaissance and the vivid trashiness of pop art. The work I'll be showing at the START Art Fair contains a lot of more fantastical figures rather than the historical figures that pepper my work, I think my imagination is freeing itself, it's writing its own fairy tales.' A large selection of Philipp Humm's sculptures and paintings will be exhibited at the START Art Fair London at the Saatchi Gallery from the 13th-17th October 2021. For more visit: startartfair.com To learn more about Humm's art visit: philipphumm.art



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