

FOR SHE'S A JOLLY GOOD FEMALE

A text by Gina Merz on the occasion of the exhibition
Poxy Proxy by Miriam Umiń and Josefine Reisch at
Galerie Noah Klink

The contribution includes excerpts from songs sung by Ariel in Disney's *The Little Mermaid* (1989) and by Olive Oyl in the film adaptation of *Popeye* (1980), as well as in earlier animated short films (1948).

*There you see her
Sitting there across the way
She don't got a lot to say
But there's something about her*

*And you don't know why
But you're dying to try
You wanna kiss the girl
Yes, you want her*

*Look at her, you know you do
Possible she wants you too
There is one way to ask her
It don't take a word
Not a single word
Go on and kiss the girl*

The mermaid as a concept exists in endless versions, structured through shifting desires, beliefs, and agendas since the medieval period. It is impossible to claim a single origin story. Instead, the mermaid functions as a shell of an idea onto which meanings have been projected over centuries.

During a studio visit with painter Josefine Reisch some weeks ago, we exchanged memories of mermaid tales we grew up with. Getting excited about details, songs, and references, I noticed that I remembered an overall romantic sentiment rather than the exact narratives. The hyper-mythological opened up in front of me like a *déjà vu*: combining my memory with the unknown, or the forgotten. Reisch tests exactly this capacity of painting by using tropes and symbols of popularized cultural heritage, and playing with what they signify. In the largest painting included in the show, *High Cube (Der goldne Topf)* (2026), two mermaid-like creatures are given additional features: they have fins not only as tails, but also as hands and what appear to be wings on their backs, making it unclear whether they are underwater or in the sky. These elements were added by the artist according to her fantasy.

The history of mermaids can be traced in part to the sirens of Greek mythology: seductive, soulless, and endowed with hypnotic singing voices capable of captivating even the strongest men. Over time, the threatening aspect of seduction becomes neutralized and aestheticized by being exchanged for an innocent beauty that needs to be kept and saved. This shows how the mermaid serves as a cultural construction that organizes femininity and disciplines first moral — and later capitalist — values of the time in which it is created. Imagination is not purely personal, but shaped by social structures, as popular examples make evident: In *The Little Mermaid* by Hans Christian Andersen from 1837 a young and soulless mermaid trades her voice for legs and endures pain for love, which stays ultimately unfulfilled and makes her dissolve into sea foam for the promise of a soul. In the film adaptation by Disney from 1989, the narrative is softened into an almost happy ending: Ariel's sacrifice is temporary, her desire for love fulfilled, and her beautiful human transformation forever. But all this only at the cost of her past life.

*I just don't see how a world that makes such wonderful things
could be bad*

Look at this stuff

Isn't it neat?

Wouldn't you think my collection's complete?

Looking around here you'd think

Sure, she's got everything

I've got gadgets and gizmo's and plenty

I've got woozits and whatzits galore

You want thingamabobs? I've got twenty!

But who cares?

No big deal

I want more!

The longing that shapes these stories materializes in Ariel's collection of human-made objects found under water, which she uses to construct an identity directed toward elsewhere. Accumulation thus becomes a way of producing identity under conditions of lack. A similar logic appears in the painting *Eurocrate (Do you believe in life after love?)* (2026), in which Cher's head appears crowned by decorative objects. Her eyes remain empty, suggesting not a person but a mask — a sign of how figureheads like her become mystified and branded, fixed as personas while the individual recedes behind them. The mask becomes a surface for projection, and therefore offers a point of identification, something that can be taken on and worn by others. The title, drawn from Cher's song *Believe* (1998), echoes the logic already present in the mermaid narrative: that life gains meaning through love and raises the question of what remains in its absence. In this sense, it also resonates with the early mermaid's condition of soullessness, as she aspires to gain a soul through being loved. In both cases, identity emerges not as interiority but as an effect of accumulation and longing.

For the paintings presented in this exhibition, Reisch worked with the technique of *trompe-l'œil*. The container in *High Cube (Der goldne Topf)* (2026) is painted in life-size, placing

the mermaids' bodies, as well as those of the viewers, in relation to it. In her smaller paintings she depicts dielines of Euroboxes, a gesture through which the artist takes a close look at the structure of the objects through disassembling them. In *Eurocrate (I just don't see how a world that makes such wonderful things - could be bad.)* (2026) Reisch places two small images of Disney's Ariel in close proximity to the boxes, putting them in contrast to their universality. The shipping container as well as the Euroboxes were never designed around human experience but around efficiency and reproducibility. The Euroboxes for example were originally made for industries like automotive production, where standardized parts needed to move efficiently between suppliers, factories, and assembly lines. And yet, there is a persistent tendency of humans to adapt to them — to fit into available structures, to become legible within predefined forms.

*And all at once I knew
I knew at once
I knew he needed me
Until the day I die
I won't know why
I knew he needed me*

*It could be fantasy, oh
Or maybe it's because
He needs me, he needs me*

*For once, for once in life
I've finally felt
That someone needed me
And if it turns out real
Then love can turn the wheel*

Another feminine figure introduced in this exhibition is Olive Oyl from the comic strip *Popeye*. She differs from the popular images of mermaids in appearance, but not much in her story. Both are endlessly revised according to what is needed from

them to fit into the current state of society. What distinguishes them are the standards of beauty through which they are constructed. Olive Oyl is angular, long-limbed, prone to outbursts; comedic, certainly, but in a way that seems to carry a quiet unease beneath the surface. She appeared in 1919 and can be interpreted as a version of the New Woman, a figure that emerged after the First World War in the United States, when women's independence, born of necessity, began to sit uncomfortably within the roles society had prepared for them. The war was over and the New Woman was both needed and dreaded. Especially after women were granted the right to vote in 1920s America. A cultural negation of the time becomes apparent through Olive Oyl: she was created modern enough to feel true to the women at the time, and helpless enough to feel safe for the men. There is something almost surgical about how the character is constructed — the independence is visible, even emphasized, and then systematically undermined by the plot. The audience is invited to enjoy her agency and her rescue in the same breath.

In 1995, Pierre Dinand designed a fragrance bottle for Moschino's label Cheap & Chic based on Olive Oyl's image, with her lanky silhouette, black hair, red top, white collar and black skirt. Miriam Umiń took the flacon as the starting point for her sculptures, rooted in a childhood memory, as her mother owned this very one. She reproduced it at her mother's scale: once in full size and once in fragments. The separated head and neck are placed on the floor, recalling the modular construction of mannequins and suggesting a fragmented as well as multiplied version. The sculptures collapse distances between icon and commodity, public image and private life, turning the bottle into a stand-in for the mother and her relation to taste, quality, and aspiration. At the same time, the fragmentation shifts her from a singular person into a multiplied one, positioning her not only as an individual but as a consumer among many. The photographic work *petit a* (2026) by Miriam Umiń can be seen as a visual footnote to the sculptures. The snapshot of material tests introduces the lens as a conceptual device that directs focus, perspective, and scale, shaping how the captured scene is perceived.

Umiń decided to produce the sculptures in light wood and paint them partly in a darker brown color, a decision that points toward material histories of value and imitation. The choice of color is rooted in the tradition of *faux bois*, a technique in which cheaper materials — wood, metal, or stone — were treated with dark brown paint to imitate more expensive woods such as walnut or mahogany. Widely used in bourgeois interiors, this finish functioned as a marker of taste and refinement, translating value into surface.

This aesthetic logic extended into industrial design, most prominently in the train cars of the Pullman Company in the late 19th century, where dark brown signified luxury and comfort. Over time, this association shifted: the same color was later adopted and trademarked by the American shipping company UPS, where it came to signify reliability, efficiency, and service. A color once meant to evoke refinement now operates as the visual language of logistics — a reversal that exposes how notions of taste and value are historically constructed and continually re-coded. Umiń’s interest lies precisely in this transformation: in the possibility of trademarking a color, of extracting it from shared visual culture and assigning it to a corporate identity. What appears as a stable marker of taste reveals itself instead as contingent, circulating, and subject to the shifting conditions of design, economy, and desire.

*If I were President, if I were President
There'd be at least ten months of June
For folks to spend their honeymoon
And night winds all would have the sweetest scent
If I were President*

*If I were President, if I were President
I'd pick up feminine morale
And get a man for every gal
More holidays would get my strong consent
If I were President*

For she's a jolly good female
She's a jolly good female
She's a jolly good female
We love our President

The exhibition by Miriam Umiń and Josefine Reisch at Galerie Noah Klink does not simply present the introduced figures, but examines the mechanisms that produce and distribute them. A formal gesture that spans the entire gallery hints at this: the floor is covered in milk bag paper, a material commonly used on construction sites. As both protective layer and display surface, it invokes notions of infrastructure and standardization within the exhibition, thereby supporting the works in revealing how projections of femininity and processes of standardization operate across spaces. The figures are defined through relation to narratives, to systems of representation and to society.

This is where the title *Poxy Proxy* comes in: it plays on the term “by proxy,” meaning the act of doing something through another person, a representative authorized to act on one’s behalf. Here, the word “poxy” is added, which expresses annoyance or disagreement, but also denotes something of poor quality. In this sense, these figures do not act for themselves, but function as carriers of desires, norms, and projections that are articulated through them. The systems they exist in act on their behalf, at times poorly. The figures embody desire while being shaped by external conditions. They are repeatedly reformulated, becoming durable cultural figures that persist through variation. Standardized forms and inherited images continue to shape what can be imagined, and how.

Perhaps this is where the tension of this exhibition holds: between repetition and deviation, between circulation and fixation, between what is available and what is made from it. Tracing the figures’ movements, listening closely to their songs, I notice they do not dissolve — they shift, they multiply.