

# The fifth season

By Brent Gregston



Jutta Koether's "Balls" (top) and "Winter" (right)



## Artist Jutta Koether adds a new season to our universe

German abstract artist Jutta Koether has transposed the late, great work by Nicolas Poussin (1594-1665) – “The Four Seasons” – to our contemporary world of climate change and crashing stock markets.

Koether is an interdisciplinary artist who engages in performance art as well as music and painting. Born in 1958 in Cologne, Germany, she lives and works in New York and Berlin. She has exhibited different sets of seasons at New York’s Whitney Biennial and Bortolami Gallery. Koether “updated” Poussin in her painting of “Spring” by putting man, not God, at the center of things. The joyful Adam and Eve rising out of her graffiti-like brushwork are a contemporary couple drawn from an advertisement for a health food store. God has become the

hard-to-distinguish BioGod, small and white and wobbly. But lines zigzag over the canvas cutting across the couple’s faces and fracturing their sexual romp in paradise.

“The zigzagging lines are a crazy combination of different financial indexes drawn from business papers like the *Financial Times* and the *Frankfurter Allgemeine*,” explains Koether. “It is a sort of symbol for our times, where the season doesn’t exist anymore because it has been replaced by an ongoing crisis.”

Koether’s “Winter,” like Poussin’s, is not a snowy solstice, but an apocalyptic disaster, a reminder that the seasons as we know them are not immutable. The Mayans, the Bible and climate change scientists seem to all agree on that point. “Poussin’s ‘Winter’ is apocalyptic with a Biblical flood,” says Koether. “My ‘Winter’ uses the same composition to create a vortex where you are drawn in. You see small people who try to escape from it. They are like the motif of a garland. The people trying to escape are forming a human chain.” Koether has also sliced through the painting with a diagonal

line that creates an out-of-kilter horizon. “It’s tilting, it’s falling, you cling to it because it’s all you have. There is nothing else.” An oversized cat, painted in fleshy tones, contemplates the chaos that engulfs the world. The cat, says Koether, “is a sort of interface and a stand-in for a person.”

And then there is “The Fifth Season,” which was the title of Koether’s show at the Bortolami Gallery. For her, it is not just another cycle like the other four, but another state of being. Carnival in her native Cologne was born of the desire for a “fifth” season. “It is something you just invent, a state of exception in which everything can run wild, in which there is total freedom.” Nature seems complicit, at rare moments, in our desire to stop the world going by. Koether cites a poem by Kurt Tucholsky that says the “fifth and most beautiful season” is the moment when summer fades, but autumn has not begun,” when “nature holds its breath.”

Both poet and painter would have us believe that this fifth season is another reality, one that could transform our lives.