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Michèle Pagel

Picknick am Wegesrand [Roadside Picnic], 2026

Group of sculptures

Opening: 30 July, 10.00 am

In the courtyard of the new social housing block, Ljuba-Welitsch-Promenade 18, 1030 Vienna.

A project in collaboration with WIGEBÄ – Wiener Gemeindewohnungs Baugesellschaft m.b.H.

In the science fiction novel 'Roadside Picnic', the Strugatsky brothers depict a night-time scene in the forest featuring young people gathered round a fire, with baskets full of food and bottles, and music playing from transistor radios. After the revellers have left, the forest and meadow animals return from their hiding places and take stock of what remains.

Drawing on this image, the sculptor Michèle Pagel has created a dreamlike scene for the courtyard of the council housing block on Ljuba-Welitsch Promenade: in her spacious still life, crafted from coloured concrete and bronze, insects such as ladybirds, dragonflies and grasshoppers encounter objects they cannot explain – things that people might have left behind there, by the wayside.

With her design for the building in the Village im Dritten, the new district east of the Fasanviertel (architects: Hawlik Gerginski ARCHITEKTEN ZT GmbH), Michèle Pagel won the competition organised by KÖR Wien 2025 in cooperation with the property developer WIGEBÄ.

Pagel's group of sculptures, due for completion in the summer of 2026, continues the tradition of art in architecture and is reminiscent of the numerous animal sculptures found in the courtyards of Vienna's municipal housing estates.

'Picnic by the Wayside' evokes the everyday nature of an 'objet trouvé', a composition born of chance, yet every element is imbued with symbolism, referring, for example, to the residents or recalling the site's past as a species-rich, inner-city wilderness.

The artwork also makes sense against the backdrop of Michèle Pagel's engagement with socio-political issues of consumption and her critique of hegemonic structures. The work derives its tension from the interplay between its playful, tactile aesthetic and its narrative quality. 'Picnic by the Wayside' tells of 'relics of a presumed human civilisation', as Olga Wukounig puts it, 'which remind us that we are temporary visitors on this earth.'

Biography

Michèle Pagel, born in 1985 in Werdau (Germany), lives in Vienna. Pagel studied fine art in Leipzig and sculpture in Milan and Vienna, graduating in 2012 from the Academy of Fine Arts, Vienna (Julian Göthe). Pagel taught at the University of Art and Design Linz (Plastic Concepts/Ceramics, 2009–2014) and was a visiting artist there in the Sculpture/Transmedia Space class during the 2023/24 academic year. Since 2025, she has been a lecturer at the University of Applied Arts Vienna (Sculpture and Space).

The artist, who prefers to work with materials such as brick, ceramics, concrete, glass and stone, was awarded the Kardinal-König Prize in 2021, amongst other honours, and received the Austrian State Scholarship for Fine Art in 2023.

Solo exhibitions have included shows at the Salzburger Kunstverein (2023), the Cultural Forum of the Austrian Embassy in Moscow (2019) and the Startgalerie MUSA, Vienna (2018).

Michèle Pagel

Picknick am Wegesrand [Roadside Picnic], 2026

by Olga Wukounig

A picnic. Picture a forest, a country road, a meadow. Cars drive off the country road into the meadow, a group of young people get out carrying bottles, baskets of food, transistor radios, and cameras. They light fires, pitch tents, turn on the music. In the morning they leave. The animals, birds, and insects that watched in horror through the long night creep out from their hiding places. And what do they see?
(Arkady and Boris Strugatsky, *Roadside Picnic*)

In the Strugatsky brothers' novel, this scene serves as a metaphor for a visit that denizens of outer space have paid to Planet Earth. The extraterrestrial objects they have left behind are as inexplicable to humans as the remains of a picnic are to the animals that inhabit the forest and meadows. The sculptor Michèle Pagel has created such a scene as seen by the animals in the courtyard of the council housing block on Ljuba-Welitsch-Promenade, which stands on a former urban wilderness. Cast in softly tinted concrete, lightly abstracted larger-than-life representations at varying scales of everyday objects are arranged on a picnic blanket. Peeking out from under the blanket are two corners of a black-and-white tiled floor—a sight familiar from Vienna's subway stations and stairwells—that prompt associations of a large game board. The other objects in the still life can likewise be read in a variety of ways. The prism-shaped sandwich wrapper suggests a critique of consumerism and waste generation; in Pagel's formal vocabulary, it also figures as an Egyptian pyramid. The peeled mandarin orange—a symbol of transience in classical still lifes—resembles representations of our planet. The segments of the fruit correspond to the time zones on the globe; the peel lying flat on the ground might almost be a map of the world. The amphora is reminiscent of archaeological finds from Roman times that were unearthed during excavations on the site, while the baby bottle and the house slipper are a nod to today's residents. The tallest figure in the group is the queen, the most powerful piece in the game of chess. Many single parents live in the building, and the queen is meant for them as a feminist symbol of empowerment.

Between the objects sit animals native to the area. Made of patinated bronze, they evoke various associations. The snail, for example, is a common symbol for slowing down, arguably an exemplary way of reducing one's ecological footprint. The bee stands for assiduity and environmental protection; the ladybug is considered a good-luck charm. Similar—albeit less widely known—symbolic meanings may be found for the caterpillar, dragonfly, grasshopper, firebugs, and moth. Even before the area was developed, the brownfield, which was home to a great diversity of species, provided an inner-city habitat for all of them. Naturalistic yet not lifelike, gently stylized for cuteness, the animal sculptures and reliefs are intended to spark the interest of children in particular. Their scale and pleasantly smooth surfaces invite passersby to touch them. Pagel hand-molded the animals

out of wax and, after having them cast at the bronze foundry, polished and patinated them to add color. For the other objects, she produced full-scale models, again by hand, out of clay. Fellow sculptors made the molds in their studios in Vienna and cast the objects in reinforced concrete. The color pigments mixed in with the dense concrete mass yield the soft hues, while added mica lets the concrete surfaces shimmer. This form of collaborative production among artists brings to mind the Wiener Werkstätte.

In using traditional sculptural materials for the ensemble, Pagel explicitly engages with the unique tradition of sculptures commissioned for municipal housing projects. The handcrafted work and the use of high-quality materials reflect her pride in Vienna's public housing as a shared heritage. Such scrutiny of domestic and family structures runs through Pagel's growing oeuvre. She questions traditional gender roles and power differentials in society with a critical yet humorous eye and her own distinctive and rebellious visual language. Her sculptural objects often combine mundane elements with the characteristic materials of the building trades, like ceramic plumbing pipes or bricks that she works on before firing and glazing. Plants and animals—the grasshopper is a recurring motif—as well as household items serve her as vehicles of symbolic meaning, as in *Roadside Picnic*, whose oversized relics of a presumably human civilization remind us that we are temporary visitors on this earth.

About KÖR Wien (Public Art Vienna)

KÖR Wien (Public Art Vienna) brings contemporary art in all its facets into the city's public spaces, making it accessible for broad audiences. Its remit encompasses temporary individual projects as well as permanent art-in-architecture projects for residential buildings, subway stations, and train stations, city squares, and projects in the field of public commemoration.

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