

STEFAN NIKOLAEV

The Innocent Eye

28.05 - 24.07.2026

Twenty-five years after the beginning of a valuable and enriching collaboration, Galerie Michel Rein is pleased to present Stefan Nikolaev's tenth exhibition.

The Innocent Eye introduces a tension between perception, memory, and the construction of vision. Borrowed from John Ruskin, the expression refers to the almost impossible idea of a gaze capable of seeing before naming—one entirely freed from the knowledge that conditions it. Stefan Nikolaev revisits this notion in order to reveal its limits today: in a world saturated with images and signs, looking is never an innocent act.

Through a body of sculptures and paintings combining hammered copper, bronze, gold leaf, marble, neon, Murano glass, and, more recently, watercolor, Stefan Nikolaev continues his exploration of images and their persistence through time. References to art history, religious iconography, popular culture, illuminated signs, and everyday objects intertwine, giving rise to forms in which collective memory and personal experience merge, within an aesthetic where the precious and the familiar resonate with one another.



Priceless Copper, 2026
hammered copper, acrylic on wood, 180 x 150 cm

This exhibition also marks an important evolution in Stefan Nikolaev's practice. For many years, the artist claimed: "I confess a desire for painting while refusing to pick up a brush." With *The Innocent Eye*, he embarks on a new body of work centered on watercolor, which he combines with his preferred materials and techniques. The fluidity and fragility of the medium enter into dialogue with the density of copper and neon, as though the image could now emerge in a more sensitive state, almost suspended.

The exhibition confronts monumentality and fragility, permanence and disappearance. Patinated copper and bronze lend the works an almost archaeological dimension, while neon introduces a vibrant, animated light. By isolating motifs drawn from art history and the collective imagination, Stefan Nikolaev questions our contemporary ways of seeing. The works thus oscillate between sculpture, image, and object, between intimate memory and shared culture.



The Innocent Eye, 2026
hammered and patinated copper, gold leaf, Murano glass neon, 42 x 100 x 20 cm

As Rose Vidal writes: "Nikolaev is an artist of the heart and of offering, sincere and warm-hearted; if he laughs at things, his laughter is free of cynicism. [...] When Nikolaev presents painting and its codes as so many vain and fleeting things, earthly pleasures, and consumer objects, he in turn grants them access to that same affective eternity with which only memory knows how to endow things."

On the occasion of the exhibition, a monograph dedicated to Stefan Nikolaev will be published in June by Dilecta Editions, featuring a text by Rose Vidal and two interviews conducted by Christine Macel and Hans-Ulrich Obrist.