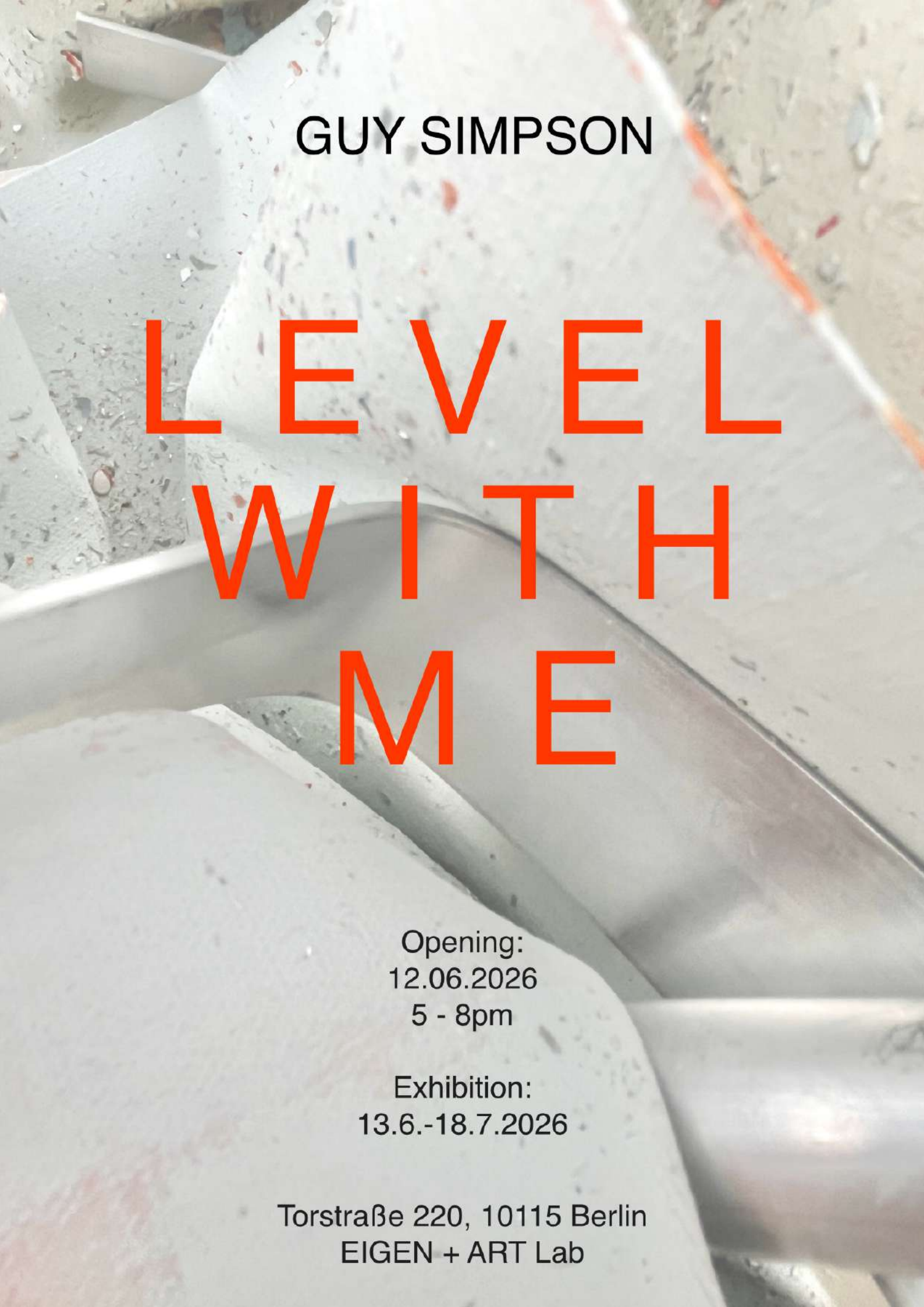

GUY SIMPSON

LEVEL WITH ME

Opening:
12.06.2026
5 - 8pm

Exhibition:
13.6.-18.7.2026

Torstraße 220, 10115 Berlin
EIGEN + ART Lab

Guy Simpson
Level With Me
12.6. - 18.7.2026
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LEVEL WITH ME

He has been in Berlin for a month already, and is still surprised by the willful solitude of the city. Nobody talks to one another here, he thinks. They all just sort of get on with it.

He's here on a writing residency, awarded to him by the German cultural embassy as part of a new cultural exchange programme. They're trying to do more collaborative work with cities in the Global South, apparently. Right now, as he sips his coffee in the morning stillness and watches people stroll through the park, another writer has been plucked from somewhere in Germany and dropped into the smog and din of Johannesburg.

He is meant to be working on his next book, but he hasn't written anything worthwhile. Truthfully, he can't crack the veneer of this place. Everything here is so utilitarian, so stubbornly practical, he thinks. And what a prosaic observation this is in a city full of concert halls and theatres and museums. Still, it's a matter of relativity, he reasons. He is not used to all this polished metal and glass. His is a city of crumbling brickwork and broken infrastructure. And it's not that he minds it much. It's just that here, so far removed from the rough edges of Johannesburg where decay and renewal are constantly jostling up against one another, he can't help but marvel at a city so seemingly at ease with itself, a place that works so hard to square the past with the present. Such tireless work to prop up a history as heavy as this.

He finishes his coffee and tosses the paper cup into the recycling bin. Today, he will take a walk somewhere new, he decides, away from the cold shadow of the Cathedral, and up North where he has heard there are clusters of galleries and bookstores.

He presses on, moving through streets lined with beige buildings all huddled together in the cold. He takes a left onto Torstraße and walks past more coffee shops and convenience stores. He continues walking until a sign catches his eye, bearing a statement – or is it a request, he wonders? – written in English: Level With Me. It's a solo exhibition at an independent art space. He enters, grabbing an A4 exhibition text on his way in.

The exhibition is split between two levels and features paintings and sculptures, both abstract and figurative, all by the same artist. First associations spark and multiply. He sees the constructed minimalism of Donald Judd, the meditative materiality of El Anatsui. The hanging wire sculptures of Cape Town-based artist Igshaan Adams come to mind, too, echoed in the warped canvas and metal sculptures orbiting the space like strange planets.

He begins with the works that look like they're comprised of rusted and weathered tiles. When he leans in, he sees that they are individually cut pieces of canvas, flecked with paint and metal filings, and thoughtfully reassembled on a larger canvas. They appear at once as an index of found materials and an aerial view of a city grid. He likes the patina they've taken on, and the peculiar quality of deterioration they're performing. Rather than crumbling and bleaching in the sun, these fabricated tiles seem to have surrendered to corrosion and oxidised ruin. It's as if there is simply too much fresh air here in Europe. But he also likes how each tile has its place, nothing about it is random. The artist has gathered up these worn and disparate tiles – scattered vignettes from a collective vision – and reassembled them, finding coherence in chaos, community in fragmentation.

The exhibition text explains that the metal filings are collected from the floor of the artist's studio, as well as the studios of fellow artists.

"When I make these works, I feel as if I'm picking up the pieces, the neglected or abandoned pieces, and reconstituting them into these artworks," reads a quote by the artist.

A portrait of the artist is on the other side of the page. He has weary, kind eyes, and dark hair. This is an exhibition about the everyday mess within contemporary urban systems, the text goes on to explain. While much of his previous work has grappled with material neglect and abandonment, here the artist has distilled his use of material as a way of viewing change, of peeling back the layers of the past in order to see the future.

In the figurative paintings, which are close-cropped frames focusing on public handrails, coin slots and drainpipes, there is order and solitude. Warped metal frames the paintings, like soft cladding. These are the trappings of a place designed to ferry people and labour, water and waste alike, back and forth as efficiently as possible. He finds himself held by the beauty and possibility of metal. How it builds and fashions contemporary cities, but also how it holds and changes colour. In one painting, he sees a whole landscape of colour and movement in a warped reflection. Aluminium, polished to a high shine like a mirror. And then rust. Always, rust, followed by collapse and reinvention.

"A nicely built city never resists destruction," he recalls reading somewhere.

He leaves the gallery and steps out into the brisk afternoon air. On his way back to the apartment, he stops and photographs exhibition posters, graffiti, architectural flourishes and follies, on his phone. He pauses at the façade of an old building, its thick layers of paint flaking and peeling, revealing strata of time and aesthetic sensibility. Beneath the muddy taupe of the top layer, he sees stately blue, and beneath this, flecks of authoritarian red bleeding through like a crime.

The wall is a journal, he thinks. A brittle archive that's escaped the city's relentless revisionism. He is still carrying the quietly resonant sentiments of the exhibition in his mind, and now, as he stares into the layered history of this place, he is reminded again of Johannesburg. How its cracked and peeling layers aren't so much a sign of a vanishing present, but rather – as is the case here – a view of the future. A young city, a restless city, hurtling through its own modernity. A city that so often serves as a litmus test for the rest of the world's economic, cultural, and political futures.

It begins to rain, and he hurries back to his apartment, sticking to the lee of the buildings as he goes. His mind is racing. He must get back and write. So many disparate pieces have started to fall into place.

– David Mann

Level With Me features a collection of new paintings and soft sculptures by Guy Simpson (b.1994 Johannesburg, South Africa). Interested in exploring new languages and methodologies for painting, and using the medium of painting as a means of making sense of place, Simpson's practice engages everyday public materials and surfaces as a lens for seeing change. In Level With Me, he embraces the generative potential of play and fragmentation to find renewal in neglect. Simpson lives and works in Cape Town, South Africa, as a visual artist and co-founder of Under Projects.