

Emmanuel Bornstein - Clinamen

In “De rerum natura,” the Roman poet Lucretius developed a concept of nature in which everything that exists consists of individual, immutable particles, the atoms. In Lucretius’s view, these are moving through empty space in a constant free fall, swerving from their path “at different times and different places.” These random aberrations, for which Lucretius coined the term “clinamen,” open up a potentiality that not only leads to the creation of bodies and matter, but also to the development of a free will and of novelty as such. Lucretius thus describes a close connection between the random swerves of falling atoms and the autonomy of the individual that is not subjected to any metaphysical principle. It is the potential of this space of possibility that Bornstein’s new series—its title “Clinamen” inspired by Lucretius—examines both substantively and in a formal manner.

The moment of falling is a recurrent motif in Bornstein’s work. While in his earlier works it was mainly linked to the horrors of the World War II, it now receives an entirely new connotation.

The fall especially bears the potential of change and of freedom to create something new. At the center of the large-format canvas works, individual figures emerge between gestural brush strokes and sharply delineated color fields. Often they can only be made out as outlines that materialize from the diffuse interplay of shapes and colors. Their silhouettes evoke a falling that is redirected into the vertical. As from afar, they usually appear fragmentary and without cognizable facial features.

The strong reduction of these figures arises from an artistic necessity. Only in this way does the particular expressive force of the bodies become apparent. It is the omission of details that enables an unimpeded gaze at the creative force of these figures that do not passively tumble into their fate but actively rebel against the pressure of the world around them. Blurred contours evoke an impression of dynamism and speed. They seem to be stretching, breaking loose, or even dancing. In these abstracted, anonymous figures appear a free will and the autonomy of the subject, generated for Lucretius by the falling of atoms and their random encounters.

With their vehement brushstrokes and dissonant color tones, the figures emerging from Bornstein’s paintings are made from the same fabric as the world that surrounds them. They only differ from the diffuse interplay of shapes by their clearly discernible form standing out against the undefined background.

Here, too, in analogy to Lucretius, the movement and concentration of abstract elements appears to lead to a new reality. In Bornstein’s wrestling between figuration and abstraction, the concept of “clinamen” thus also enters the image on a formal level. In the paintings, processes of falling and concentration, moments of touching and merging, of dynamic and consolidation are interweaving. Expressive color application and handwritten fragments

circle the figures' silhouettes, superimpose them or shy away from them. Fragmented color surfaces are interrupted by sudden white. Gesturally applied markings intersect or interweave. As in a puzzle, Bornstein brings individual shapes together, but they cannot form a harmonic whole. Clear contours delineate diffuse color surfaces that sediment layer by layer, as in a palimpsest. Like a vehemently torn paper, they form sharp edges and seem to break open the limits of the canvas.

An inner force governs Bornstein's paintings. A ripping and pushing appears to move through the multilayered paintings, from which individual figures emerge that, in the process of falling, unlock new possibilities for themselves.

Anja Heitzer

Clinamen - by Cyril Legrand

Et je m'en vais, fantôme, habiter les décombres. (Victor Hugo)

You have to see the rubble. Not the ruins, the proud and arrogant remnants of the past that time patiently carves into abandoned buildings, but the chaotic heaps of materials, stones and debris that history produces violently through wars, ravages and disasters, burying the bodies, the objects and those very same ruins. For it is this rubble that a part of humanity must confront – in the past, present and future. Not Persepolis, Luxor, Carthage or Rome, but Guernica, Dresden, Berlin, Warsaw, Hiroshima, Beirut, Sarajevo, Baghdad, Aleppo . . .

It is difficult not to be fascinated by such a sight. For a long time now ruins have been the subject of aesthetic attraction, and destruction itself has at times prompted a certain exaltation; there is clearly a risk of lapsing into the postures that W. G. Sebald criticised when he spoke of the writers who, after the bombing of German cities during the Second World War, sought to construct 'aesthetic or pseudo-aesthetic effects from the ruins of an annihilated world'.¹

So while it is necessary to see the rubble and the ruins, to show or suggest them, this is mainly in order to see what can arise from them: these bodies, survivors of the devastation, these barely human forms, evanescent ghosts that are able to hold on and live in spite of everything; these bodies, bent but not broken, that are still able to move, stand up and, with the energy of despair, try to act, love and dance even, to fight and sometimes rise, like the insurgents of the Warsaw Ghetto who fought – not in the hope of surviving, but to die fighting. What you have to see and show in the midst of the rubble are these 'fireflies'², these tiny and improbable lights, isolated in the dark of night, trying to avoid destruction, downfall and extinction as much as they can. Seeing these firefly-bodies in the midst of the rubble, hearing the voices under the ashes, is not only doing them justice or making them exist beyond their death, but it also means kindling the struggles and desires of the present.

What is required then, in the face of collapse, is to find unexpected resources in the downfall and – in this world weighed down by the likelihood of the worst happening, by despair and resignation – to revive memories and images that open up possibilities. A minimal requirement, surely, and probably not up to the current threat, but is it not from the smallest of things, the minima, that great change can come? In this context we should remember the cosmological model proposed by Lucretius in the first century BC: the atoms, indestructible and indivisible elementary particles, the primary matter of all things, are able to deviate spontaneously, albeit only slightly, from their trajectory to establish contact with others, thus producing the world and its objects through a succession of clashes and aggregations. Without this inclination, without this clinamen,

'nature would not have created anything'³ and the atoms would fall indefinitely downwards into the void without touching one another, like drops of rain that nothing stops. If there is a world, if there are objects, if there are bodies, aggregates, collisions, if matter comes into existence, it is because the minima can influence trajectories. In this world, a slight, imperceptible deviation is enough to produce considerable and incalculable consequences. The clinamen introduces an element of radical discontinuity and permanent disruption with regard to the past and to any form of fatefulness, and hence a fundamental indeterminacy and unpredictability.

What must be seen and shown, therefore, beyond all fascination, is that in the very destruction, in the downfall and in the face of destruction, it is always possible to oppose, to bifurcate, to swerve, to unite differently, to create new worlds and to try to destroy what destroys us.

C. Legrand, January 2019

1 W. G. Sebald, *On the Natural History of Destruction*, trans. Anthea Bell (London: Modern Library, 2003), 53.

2 See Georges Didi-Huberman, *Survival of the Fireflies* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018).

3 Lucretius, *On the Nature of Things*, trans. W. H. D. House (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1924), 216–17.