

The Wound, the Wound!

Annotation to new works from the series of portraits „Another Heavenly Day“

The question that imposes itself when looking at the painting is: Is it him or is it not him? There are some features reminiscent of the emblematic and often reproduced last photographic portrait of Franz Kafka from 1923: the low, semicircular hairline that sprawls into the vertically furrowed brow. The nose curved to the left that lends an air of asymmetry to the face. The striking ears that stick out a little and thereby help define the contours of the frontal view.

But there are also differences: the mouth is somewhat fuller and softer in the picture, and the eyes' gaze appears shaded in a melancholy fashion and self-absorbed, whereas in the photo it burns and blazes, as if it was lit up from the inside by the illness rioting in Kafka's body. In addition, there is Emmanuel Bornstein's special painting technique: the pastose application of paint, multiple overpainting, dissonant coloration. The facial features almost seem to disappear behind the smears and seemingly chaotic brush marks, only to simultaneously reveal character traits that remain hidden in a smooth portrait.

So is it him or is it not him? This question, Bornstein says, is not one he wants to answer in his art. It is not important to reveal identities, even where an analog or digital photo is the starting point of an artistic work: "In my works, it is the same as in everyday life. There, too, you keep meeting people whose names you may know, but not much else about them: Is it a person I can trust? Or someone who seeks to harm me? It is always an oscillation between recognizing and misconceiving, between irritation and confirmation. I like this feeling of ambivalence in my art, too, because it is the closest to what you experience in real life."

Thus, Emmanuel Bornstein positions almost all of the portraits in the series "Another Heavenly Day" in the no man's bay of inconclusiveness: sometimes, the viewer believes to have identified the Nazi war criminal Klaus Barbie—who is reduced to the cypher K—then again another dictator from the gallery of horrors of the 20th century. But in the case of Franz Kafka, there are some added dimensions with which the artist plays his glass bead game. It is not without intention that he included a facsimile of Kafka's famous handwritten "Letter to my Father" in the catalog to the exhibition "Father Figures." This has become a much interpreted and by now overdetermined document of an existential upheaval and a patriarchal structure restricting an individual life, pointing beyond the individual biography and the cause of the father's disapproval of the engagement with Julia Wohryzek. Bornstein does not join in with the common interpretations of the father-son conflict as a "time-based phenomenon of expressionist youth" after the turn of the century, but leaves the reproduced letter in its iridescent

multiplicity: it is not supposed to be interpreted, but to illuminate the art as the epistemological background irradiation, without domesticating it ideologically. This generates a multiplicity of imaginary interactions—between the painter and his own father-problems, which he circles artistically in the exhibition “Father Figures,” between the historical resonating cavity and charged present, between text and image, between intelligibility and hallucination. “I come from a family of authors and theater people,” says Emmanuel Bornstein, “and had access to Franz Kafka very early on. From the beginning, he has always been a reference figure for my work.” In his artistic approximation process, in Kafka’s face and in his heart, he was looking for answers to questions he was asking himself in relation to his own life: “When you paint a portrait, half of it is always the person that you are seeking to portray and half of it is you yourself. Especially if you paint a person whom you do not know. Then, a projection of the personal emotion onto the template/the image is taking place.”

In that sense, Franz Kafka is a characteristic figure of the series “Another Heavenly Day,” in which father figures are analyzed and radiographed in their demonic nature and in their benevolence, in their opacity and their transparency. It is not about recognizability and classifications, but about an illumination taking place in the painting process, about a Benjaminian recognition “choc” flashing up immediately. The artist becomes the medium of a story that, in a way, tells itself auto-generatively, beyond his conscious awareness. Whereas the narrative part becomes less important in the newer portrait works, in comparison to series such as “Three Letters,” in which linguistic signs play an important role as a screen.

Painting per se reveals itself as an expressive canal for transporting spiritual conditions and emotional convulsions, the oscillation between figuration and abstraction creates that area of tension in which a polyphony of references and tonalities can unfold. “When I start a painting,” Emmanuel Bornstein reports, “I never use a white canvas. I apply layer upon layer of color, until from this overpainting a texture forms; a skin that breathes.” During this accumulative process, there are also coincidences or accidents: ream-like thickenings, which turn the base of the painting into a braille alphabet, color gradations, gaps, damages. “I like to use these little impurities to give the paintings life.” The aspect of wounding as a mirror reflex of the catastrophic conditions of the 20th century in particular, which Emmanuel Bornstein lets resonate in his paintings, plays a major role in his aesthetic calculations. He cites Antonin Artaud and his theory of a theater of cruelty: “This cruelty will be bloody if it is necessary, but not necessarily. In this way, theater can be identified with a strict moral purity that doesn’t shy away from paying the price to life that has to be paid.”

“When I want to animate an artwork, inspire it with a soul,” Bornstein explains, “there is only one way to accomplish this:

the medium I use, be it paper or a canvas, has to suffer. My work with texture consists in attacking the surface.” One might think of the manifold wounds from occidental art history, which became a cypher for salvation or damnation: the five wounds of Christ, also called the holy wounds, which Jesus suffered in crucifixion and which were depicted in numerous paintings over the centuries. Or, and above all, the wound of Amfortas in Parsifal that does not want to heal until the “pure fool” appears, who is known through empathy. Such incurabilities, which we owe to the memory of the camps and of the mass destruction of the 20th century, are deeply embedded into the subtext of the works without pushing into the foreground and claiming dominance over the work. What is fascinating about these new portraits is rather their fragile status between a damaged figurativeness and an abstraction unfolding toward the figurative. Some of these portraits are overgrown by thickly applied blots in vitriolic green and yellow hues, behind which the facial features become blurry. Others mix geometric shapes with wild swirls of the brush and thereby create a hysterical dialectic. Finally, there are paintings in which the color dabs are placed so pointedly that the viewer is reminded of the well-known painting “Tête de Clown” by Joseph Kutter.

At this point in the cultural-historical development of painting, Emmanuel Bornstein’s portraits of course did not develop from thin air. He himself names Francis Bacon as inspiration, one could also find trace elements of Richard Gerstl or Alexej von Jawlensky. More obvious are references to the Nouveaux Réalistes and in particular Raymond Hains, whom Bornstein mentions explicitly, in relation to cross-references in the 20th century. His torn-off posters, the “affiches lacérées,” in which layers of posters stuck on top of one another were exposed, reveal stunning similarities with some of the portraits by Bornstein. Also the production principle of tearing off, burning, and painting over of advertising slogans finds a late echo in the aesthetic of the wound that Bornstein propagates. But a decisive difference to the principle of *décollage* as it has been practiced, apart from Hains, by artists such as Arman, Mimmo Rotella, and Pierre Restany, consists in the fact that Emmanuel Bornstein does not pursue a deconstructivist approach: it is not about dismembering a putative whole by aggressive and invasive measures and to particularize it, thus implicitly pointing to the disrupted life context owed to the catastrophic world conditions of the 20th century, but rather to create a new context from the aggregation of the fragments: “I try to reconstruct something,” says Emmanuel Bornstein. “I do not care about deconstruction, but about reconstruction. I show the scars, I show the wound, but I want to be a part in closing it.”

And so in this art, despite being charged with all of the negative energies of world history of the past hundred years, there is at least the perspective of a new context that reproduces itself on the retina as a weak visual marking when walking through the seventh circle

of hell: line textures, blot parade, nerve course as indicators of a world as visual imagination.

“Music is the healing force of the Universe.” Thus ran a dictum of the late great free jazz hymnic and tenor saxophonist Albert Ayler. Borrowing this phrase, one could say about the portraits from the series “Another Heavenly Day” by Emmanuel Bornstein: “Art is the healing force of the Universe.”

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