

THE BEAUTIFUL IN THE PECULIAR

Does evolution care less about happiness?
How can you penetrate the penalty area of good taste?
And what does all this have to do with a white rabbit? –
A conversation between Florian Illies and Bernhard Martin

Florian Illies: *What are you currently doing in the field of painting?*

Bernhard Martin: At the moment I'm painting a female breast.

And what insight have you gained from this activity?

What an unbelievable fabric, what fantastic texture! You can also paint it as a globe... I would place the nipple at the centre of Africa, the birthplace of the first humanoid.

So to you it is always about absolutely everything? Do you ever take it down a notch?

That is my disposition. To limit the course thoughts take seems too timid to me.

And what does the globe have on the breast?

Very little. Something I can't place, exactly. Perhaps I will add a hand, paint a hand that rubs and strews salt between thumb and index finger. Like manna from heaven. With fat gems and garish jewellery. I love the metamorphosis, the moment when something transforms. Physically or intellectually. An image can be completely transfigured by a new gesture or a new feeling – and preferably more than once simultaneously.

It certainly surprised me that this single layer of meaning wasn't foiled in this picture. You're famous for the fact that your images look like busy intersections in a big city, even up to the inclusion of a squashed hedgehog complete with tyre prints. Like vehicles, thoughts and themes come rushing in from every direction. There's the red and the green of the changing traffic lights. On every side ads glisten in the lightboxes for dating sites and H&M and Kinder Surprises.

Yes, my paintings look more or less as you describe. At the same time, however, my images are elusive; they become calm and withdraw into the background. That's the reason that I often talk about the idea that, when it comes down to it, I'm an abstract painter. Because I'm not really representing anything but rather enriching the canvas with a certain sensibility...

What pleases me most in the picture of the intersection is the pedestrian, who suddenly crosses at a red light, forcing an SUV to brake abruptly. If I manage to depict that in a painterly way without illustrating the original scene – that is, to transform the sudden incursion of the unexpected into the cognitive systems of what is suitable for mass consumption – then I will be content.

You want to paint the cognitive or aesthetic skid marks of the viewer?

Something like that, maybe. Or actually... probably not. I'm no pedagogue, after all.

Do you drive a car?

I used to, but not so much today. Sharing comes closer to my idea of mobility... I'd like to rent and share a car like a train of thought or an emotion I paint. After all, I don't want to drive the same old car forever. I also don't want to own anything – what a fatuous constraint on life. That would be like painting the same thing over and over again.

If we consider the simultaneity in your paintings, the interlocking of various semantic levels: doesn't this carry the risk that the energies and the substances mutually cancel each other out on the canvas?

Yes, certainly, that danger is real. But because we're more interested in entertainment, in the easily digestible rather than proper food, this is at least an alternative that's fit for the purpose. The rest isn't up to us, anyway; it's a matter for future generations... Then we'll see what recedes into the background and what comes to the fore.

What is your biographical background? What role does the concept of "Heimat" play for you?

I grew up in the vicinity of Kassel. That's the space of my aesthetic experience: a half-destroyed city, so broken that I put a gloss on it by the way I looked at it. Later, alcohol helped with that. And eventually I truly came to love it. This brokenness made such an impression on me that it still has a place in my work... And on top of all that, like Mount Olympus, there's Schloss Wilhelmshöhe. From my home it was fifteen kilometres uphill on foot to reach the museum. I took that walk about once a month to see the Old Masters. And instead of taking the bus back, I spent the fare on postcards to take home as some sort of field kit. Ultimately, these postcards were the first, the primordial, sustenance that I began to copy. So I started from a copy, not from the original.

Didn't it get boring – always the same images?

No, fortunately there was the corrective of *documenta*. That was the place that threw open all the windows for me. It was the now, the contemporary, the path away from the old, towards the new. Manfred Schneckenburger's *documenta 6* in 1977 was my aesthetic initiation rite. The *Honigpumpe* by Beuys! Walter De Maria's *Vertical*

Earth Kilometre! The *Oxidation Paintings* by Andy Warhol, the *Roberte* cycle by Klossowski, the *Video Jungle* by Paik...! And the films of Stanley Kubrick and Rainer Werner Fassbinder... Wow. Early on I became aware that significant art is about pushing the envelope and transcending limits. The limits of material, of thought, of taboos, of good taste, of what can be imagined.

Art as liminal experience? Isn't there something missing here?

Sure. What is missing is craft. I love good craftsmanship. Regardless of whether we're talking about good shoes, a fantastic cake or a painting. I love the craft that goes into art: the well-made. That is absolutely a value in and of itself. The virtuosity of a manual skill is timeless. Technical refinement is the basic requirement for the implementation of an idea through the imagination. And I'm not talking about the well-conceived or the well-intended here.

Put simply: art also comes from learning.

Yes, absolutely. Great art is, among other things, the result of a great deal of visual experience – and self-correction. That is the only path to precision. Precision and rigour in thinking and inventing, and also in implementing – that's so important. From a young age I was keenly aware that it would take me quite some time to master the skills of doing what I actually yearned for. From the beginning it was clear to me that it would take a long time to access all available potential and give it form. Experience is central to being able to unearth one's own treasure trove. I knew I would need a long period of training. I had to exercise extreme patience – even though I'm the nervous type.

And when did you complete this apprenticeship?

Some time during the last decade, roughly four years ago, I suddenly sensed that I have the alphabet at my disposal, that I can simply call on these tools whenever I want. Let me put it another way: I no longer really paint what I want. I paint what comes my way – externally as well as internally. At the same time. I am the catalyst, the mediator. It's like a journey. And I am the tourist who browses around my own images and abysses. I'm the one who uses the stereotypes and then loves and hates it in equal measure when I've found them. Say, the sunset that looks like it's straight out of a travel brochure. That's what it's all about. How the occurrence of the expected can be disappointing – and how the unexpected becomes beautiful.

When do these journeys come to an end?

The image always prescribes the ending. The work predetermines it. There is this moment when it is time to say: *finito*.

With each painting I embark once more on this journey. For me, the medium is painting, because I love painting, but actually that's irrelevant. It could be any other medium, if I loved it. But I use the brush. That's my tool.

Why does this tool always generate figurative representations?

For two reasons. The figurative is a means of transport to increase the recognition value for the viewer. And: abstraction, the major force of

Modernism, has run into some difficulties regarding perception. The radically white painting of a Ryman, the black canvases of Soulages or Reinhardt – these have, in many cases, deteriorated into decoration. Historically speaking, the radical thinking that once underpinned them has been exhausted. The reception of the audience has caught up with the authors. So you have to come up with new ideas again.

And how does this turn your tool, the brush, into a magic wand?

Well, for example, by painting a wand and employing it as an element in a painting... now that really is the most ridiculous cliché. The magic wand. That's why I paint it, and then the glitter, and the hat from which the white rabbit magically emerges. I'm intrigued by these tricks, because for a long time everyone's been able to see through them and you can watch videos on the internet on how to do them. That's precisely the reason I bring the white rabbits onto my canvases. For me, they're a symbol of innocence. When is that lost? As soon as we see through the trick and understand how it works? Or when, despite our better knowledge, we pretend to marvel at it? The white rabbits scamper to the boundaries of the perceptual categories. They scamper from being antiheroes to being heroes, or they end up as a Sunday roast or in the shredder.

Scamper?

Well, perhaps that's too slow. My images are about the unexpected. I love the surprise attack, like, say, in football. The lightning-fast transition, the counterattack.

So the goal is always to penetrate the penalty area?

Yes. I love the surprise! Penetrating the penalty area again and again. The penalty area of good taste. Of stereotypes. Of painterly styles. The penalty area is the holy of holies. What a brilliant word! The place of the impending penalty. One you receive or hand down. You penetrate the special zone, the zone of shamelessness, the lightness of the metamorphosis, the zone free of fear and rot.

And what will you call this penetration of the penalty area in the case of your painting with the magic wand, on which you're currently working?

There are two working titles for the painting that appeal to me at the moment: *Die Evolution schert sich nicht ums Glück* (Evolution Couldn't Care Less About Happiness) or *Macht keinen Sinn, ist aber schön* (Makes no Sense, but Is Beautiful). Those are scraps of conversations I seize on, thoughts, they trigger something and then I paint. Words are better at objectifying things and thoughts. Even absurdity. I am looking for new subjects – in the present. In the presence of words as well as images. That's why my paintings are shot through with new media, Disney World, transfer technology. Cut out of their frame of reference, in my practice they become codes and modes for grand emotions or for ridiculousness.

For instance?

For instance, the dove of peace. How is it possible that we are still agreeing on this image by Picasso? Doves are ugly and dirty creatures.

We hate them in our inner cities. The honourable carrier pigeon has almost completely faded into obscurity. So we turn a bird, which in reality is likely to cause negative emotions, into a symbol of peace. Why are we incapable of finding a new image that is better suited to our times?

How do you mean?

Symbols are becoming empty. As a matter of fact, they're becoming completely devoid of any meaning. But nevertheless we drag them along with us for a while. I'd like to do something about that. As a German, to take but one example, I really don't want to identify any longer with that unbelievably ugly colour combination of black, red and gold as my flag. What an altogether ludicrous, empty, outmoded concept to define countries by three arbitrary colours, and the ugliest combinations imaginable... That's not even suited for an emoji in a smartphone. Shouldn't we rather put "Vorsprung durch Technik", that magnificent Audi slogan, on our banners, and be done with it? Then everyone would know: Ah, Germany, not Belgium [laughs].

Since you've been a part of the contemporary German painting scene for at least two decades now, people recognise your paintings with their unique sampling of styles and semantic layers. They go: ah, Bernhard Martin. Is that a good thing?

Actually, it's not an issue for me. Of course, it's nice if all of my paintings are recognisably by Bernhard Martin, although no two are alike. It's good if people see the form. That's really all I'm interested in; it's the only thing that endures. Content is always a child of the times. Having said that, it's still my view of the world inside me and around me, which is possibly expressed in my paintings. It's my kind of roving around and compiling, even if my approach changes slightly every day, be it through new experiences, reading, or new doors opening inside me or around me. But the point is that, in addition to this mixture, the paintings always contain two more elements: shameless extravagance and generosity.

Generosity?

Yes, the point is profusion. I want to make presents. I see myself as a present. I want to give away everything, throw everything out, regardless of whether anyone is interested or not. But please, no holding back. No unobtrusiveness.

But kitsch is perfectly fine?

Ah, kitsch. Isn't that the most magnificent of categories? I love playing with it. Kitsch and normality are the lowest common denominators of the masses. Isn't it true that, today, abstraction in muted tones is kitsch? For a long time now, abstraction has feverishly awaited its own disposal in cheap furniture stores and museum shops. That is of no interest to me. I want to haul things into the realm of the unexpected, the absurd. I want a preconceived aesthetic perception to slip and slide. I want the ground to become slippery. I want things to defy logic entirely. That's the most beautiful thing anyone can achieve. The point is to find images that don't degen-

erate into decoration and are free of self-pity, self-importance and moral cowardice.

Is subversion the pinnacle of beauty?

Yes. But I don't mean that cynically. I like sunsets. I like magic wands. However, in painting they are mere symbolisations of states, or just the object as such. For that reason I bring them to my canvases. Balzac writes: "The beautiful is the peculiar." That's an excellent observation. Beauty is the greatest provocation. And, of course, at the surface level it's about well-crafted entertainment. It's crystal clear: the viewer is to look this way, is to be seduced, is to marvel, is to be unsettled.

So you want to tell modern picture stories.

Yes, why not? I'm from Kassel. That's not only the city of *documenta* but also of the Brothers Grimm. And I have a great love for told stories. And for the symbols in them. But we live in the here and now. Our fairy tales are called *Ice Age* and *Minions*. These are the visual archives of our generation. To have Little Red Riding Hood amble through my paintings as a symbol of innocence would be too boring for me, yesterday's news. Things have to commit adultery, aesthetically speaking. Only then do they become interesting to me. We live in a world of digitally manufactured stories and characters and therefore I pull the world into my paintings like a file into an email.

Do you actually understand your own paintings?

Of course not. Many things in my paintings are inexplicable. I don't look for explanations.

This conversation took place on January 9th 2020 in Berlin