

The Ambivalence of things

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Although Eckart Hahn's works are both subtle and enigmatic, and consequently difficult to decipher, they radiate a mysterious tranquillity and serenity.

Nothing in these pictures seems to be coincidental or arbitrary. The artist is in charge of every part of this precisely structured world of imagery. His motifs are defined by a high level of technical precision, and are presented with absolute sincerity and a great deal of attention to detail. Eckart Hahn's representation of materiality is masterly. In combination with subtle light compositions, he is able to add remarkable lustre to the otherwise dull and somewhat stark characteristics of acrylic painting. Most of his compositions are designed in the manner of a stage. A narrow foreground gives way to a partly monochrome expanse. Objects and figures clearly stand out against this backdrop, as if in a display case.

This pictorial form enables a private or even intimate confrontation with subjects that elude simple interpretations because of their foreignness. Eckart Hahn's tableaux function like chamber plays in which the impact of newly combined elements develop as in a silent drama. They closely resemble the world of dreams, however, without seeming too surreal.

At first sight the objects all seem familiar. However, according to the principles of a collage, they are subject to a fundamental process of redefinition which creates completely new contexts by means of heterogeneity.

This magical and to some extent also fantastic kind of realism is fuelled by subtly delivered invasions of the sinister and the absurd.

In 2007 Eckart Hahn started to supplement his pictorial works with sculptural objects in which stuffed animals often play a part. The narrative syntax and the motifs in these three-dimensional scenes merge almost seamlessly with the imagery of the paintings. The balanced modulation between the genres painting and object art is an expression of the artist's general approach which is to find a reasonably unimpeded passage for his ideas in both media. The Symbolists of late 19th century saw an elective affinity in the myth of Narcissus due to its focus on the imaginary. Eckart Hahn's works function as a mirror of a spiritual inner world which draws on an almost exuberant imagination in order to process a variety of topics. It is practically impossible to find a common denominator. Actually, every work requires a special description and analysis. However, there are a few recurring motifs that the artist processes in series of images.

Mushrooms coated in paint, gloved hands, mountains, crosses, animals, especially birds, melted toys and also

plastic bags are among these motifs. Often the sources for these subjects are derived from books or the internet. In order to make the figures which he himself calls "Tÿtenwesen (bag creatures)", Eckart Hahn uses plastic bags which he stuffs accordingly and then arranges in settings in his studio. This way, he is able to transfer the complicated pattern of folds to his paintings. Within the context of this idiosyncratic cosmos of images, Eckart Hahn is not afraid to refer to important topics regarding our existence. His pictures revolve around spirituality, lost values, the question of the meaning of life and its finitude. "Death is the final myth", the artist pointed out during a podium discussion with me on 19 May 2011 in the Wagner & Partner Gallery in Berlin. All questions fall silent beyond this boundary. However, at the same time it opens the gates to a kind of reality which is no longer determined by rationality and the laws of nature. As is generally known, sleep (Hypnos) is the brother of death (Thanatos). Eckart Hahn creates scenes which bear witness to a range of sentiments from vague alienation to menacing signs of violence and destruction. However, his pictures never offer only one kind of interpretation. They are meshed with a closely woven web of ambivalences which affirms these works' inherent openness in the face of all attempts of interpretation. This also includes unexplainable causalities with which the artist confronts his viewers in an almost criminological way.

This is the case in "Herrgottswinkel (God's Corner)" from 2008 in which an over-dimensional wooden cross on patterned wallpaper shows signs of having been charred by fire. Clouds of soot have blackened the wall. A wooden rod leaning against the wall shows the same kind of damage at its tip. However, there is no explanation for this phenomenon. Who set the fire? Did it start by itself? Why was only part of the cross affected by the fire? Is it a symbol? Definitely! But what does it mean? Is it about the destruction or about the affirmation of faith? And what role do the white lilies play that can be interpreted as a traditional symbol of the Immaculate Conception and purity? But then again, have they not simply been painted white, together with their leaves and stems? And what does this detail tell us about the relationship between semblance and truth? Questions of this nature could be asked ad nauseam without ever finding the answers in the picture itself. Eckart Hahn's pictorial inventions are based on intuitive chains of association in which the contrariness of different perspectives is the main aim. In this light, the object "Janus" from 2009 is almost symptomatic for the artist's creative approach.

A stuffed crow is looking at its own catoptric representation in a semipermeable mirror. From a certain angle it turns into the image of a preserved dove which the artist mounted onto the other side of the mirror in an inverted pose. The viewer's position alone determines what can be seen at which moment. Eckart Hahn's aim is not to revoke contradictions but to visualise them.

Attempts to interpret Hahn's "Tŷtenbilder (bag images)" can lead to similar confusion. Recently he also started integrating art historical examples in these works, such as Hyacinthe Rigaud's famous portrait of the Sun King in the Louvre or the "Adoration of the Magi" by Peter Paul Rubens. The reinterpretation of these figures with a very contemporary and at the same time also mundane kind of material seems provocative because at first sight it implies devaluation. These works trigger a large array of associations ranging from the problem of increasing littering, to Christo and Jean-Claude's wrapping projects, sexually connoted fetish costumes, and finally, the photographic evidence of torture in Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo Bay. However, none of these things are truly relevant for Eckart Hahn. In his works he reflects the value of the surface which becomes the actual topic in the shape of a painstakingly elaborated subject of painting. This meta-level is indicated in the paint splotches which were apparently dribbled onto the plastic foil as can be seen in "Ludwig XIV" and "Matterhorn mit Tisch (Matterhorn and table)". All in all, the web of ambivalences makes it impossible to get to the bottom of the mystery of Eckart Hahn's pictures. Beneath their surface there is nothing but painting itself.

For a while the abundance of motifs in his works even made Eckart Hahn himself wary until he discovered his excessive imagination as an underlying artistic approach. In view of the stunning variety of pictorial inventions, I was reminded of a verse in Dante's "Divine Comedy" in which imagination is mentioned as a place into which rain falls [1] In connection with the Christian understanding of the world, the miracle of imaginativeness was seen as a divinely inspired process. In spite of his preoccupation with religious and mythical themes, Eckart Hahn's world of imagination is ultimately defined by the collective visual memory of our secularised present. However, the yearning question regarding truth and authenticity is a driving force behind the shimmering and elaborately composed surfaces that veil the things in Eckart Hahn's works.

[1] „Poi pioveve dentro a l'alta fantasia" (Purgatorio, XVII, 25)

