

End of the World?

Who would ever expect to find, in a broom-cupboard, a conflagration, or in a model kit with a turkey, a partridge and a peacock, an explosion which, if it does not destroy everything, can be removed from the sprue just like the animal figures themselves? The catastrophe does not even spare the toy world, it seems. Carrying a shoulder bag and a backpack, a child couple ("Hänsel und Gretel") walk through a pine forest. Everything is white, deep-frozen, covered in snow or sugar icing, including the figures. Two treetops are burning like candles, you can see the blue edge of the flames. From above, a melting substance is flowing into the picture, like icicles. The scene is reminiscent of a world of fantasies and fairy tales.

In Eckart Hahn's recent works, fire plays a major role. Burning boots bearing the words "I am" evoke the wearer's person, but he is not in the picture. Nevertheless, in spite of, or precisely because of, his absence and the symbolic representation of man through the written words, the person is very present.

Eckart Hahn defamiliarizes innocuous everyday objects and takes them out of their normal context to create new associations. In the painting "Fire", a young man is sitting on a big collapsible cardboard box which, taken together with five other boxes placed in a seemingly random order, form a big cross presented frontally in an extreme high angle view. The lower, longer part of the cross is burning, two of the boxes have caught fire. The man is wearing only swimming trunks. As if he had spent a nice day at the sea, he sits relaxed around a campfire, staring into the flames. Eckart Hahn portrays stories in his paintings which the viewer is left to decipher. What has happened or will happen? Time stands still before the story unfolds to its uncertain ending. The protagonist knows that the fire will spread out. He sits on the crossbar of the Latin cross which symbolizes man's solidarity with his fellow men. The longitudinal axis represents his union with God. Is it a coincidence that solely this bar has caught fire? As a man influenced by the Christian faith, Eckart Hahn uses the iconography of the cross which points to a sacrificial death. Perhaps, the man has knowingly accepted it, seemingly prepared, with no worldly goods with him and his head shaved like a monk's. Near the boxes, there are traces on the ground, as if the sacrifice had already been consummated. Will it bring salvation to mankind? Will the man simply stand up and walk away from the fire? This remains unclear and lies in an inexplicable time horizon which is not represented in the painting.

From time immemorial, the imagery of fire has exerted a powerful fascination on man, however Eckart Hahn uses it not as a purely destructive element, but as symbol for a new beginning - a deep-rooted belief in many cultures. Indeed, the new can only emerge from the destruction of the old. Various kinds of metamorphoses can be found in his work. His paintings demonstrate the beauty inherent in destruction.

This artist is not interested in the superficial, he wants to look behind the veil, into the heart of things and people. By fusing them with imaginary elements into a new reality, Eckart Hahn casts his personal experiences into paintings.

His "plastic bag figurines" - as he himself calls them - are particularly irritating, human-like creatures made from plastic bags, partly printed with brand names well-known in everyday life. Is the viewer to simply assume that they are human beings who have wrapped themselves in plastic as a means of protection, unable to survive without air to breathe? On the contrary, these plastic bags seem to have developed their own persona in the world and resemble human beings only in physiognomy. Outwardly, these living things, strange yet somehow touching, lack apparent individuality, as if straight out of a science fiction film. Nevertheless, Eckart Hahn depicts them to illustrate sensitive and intimate issues. Even though she is portrayed wearing the cheapest material imaginable - plastic bags as disposable articles in a consumer society - , the figure in the painting "Mother" strikes a dignified pose. In the painting "Rinpoche", a creature wrapped in yellow plastic gives birth to an identical smaller creature - the reincarnation of a Buddhist lama? This birth provokes a feeling of eccentricity, but it still infuses hope and humor.

Eckart Hahn's paintings often show people in overalls next to life-preserving or life-saving medical tubes. Gloved hands guarantee sterility, thus providing a sense of security in hermetic rooms. Are they indoor or outdoor spaces? The artist leaves the viewer in the dark. The focus lies on one particular isolated scene of a strange episode which creates an atmosphere of unreality, reminding us of dreams. The unclear location of the scene contrasts starkly with the photographic exactitude of the objects in the picture. Materials are reproduced with such attention to detail that they create a strong haptic effect similar to a trompe l'oeil.

In some paintings, words or signs make the viewer believe that they can help him decipher the scenes; sometimes however, they confuse him even more when, for example, he attempts to understand how mushrooms hanging from the ceiling could write words on the table ("Meal"). Looking at the works of Eckart Hahn brings back memories. The model kit mentioned at the beginning in the picture "Fun" develops, through the alignment of the individual parts, a particular language whose letters remind us of Russian bread which we know from our childhood.

The unreal nature of the scenes represented in his works, we associate with pictures embedded in our minds. If, for example, we read a fantasy novel, we do not question at all the description, but we spontaneously create a figurative representation. In his novel *Hard-boiled Wonderland und das Ende der Welt*¹, the Japanese writer Haruki Murakami writes about skulls of unicorns kept in the library of a fictional world to preserve the old dreams of a town which can be read without a written language. Another example: it is not difficult to imagine someone cutting off a shadow with a knife to free himself from his past and from his memories and feelings. Eckart Hahn's paintings produced the same effect: the represented scenes spellbind the viewer, he does not question the representation, strange though it may

¹ Haruki Murakami: *Hard-boiled Wonderland und das Ende der Welt*, published in 1985 in Japanese (original title: *Sekai no owari to hādoirudo wandārando*). Translated in German in 1993.

seem. Thus, in the older work „Les frères“, the surprising thing is not so much that the three men have ram and deer heads, but rather that they can be brothers.

The viewer is confronted with pictures of hidden worlds which prompt existential questions: How does man cope with pain, loneliness and alienation? Will generic engineering gradually cause everything natural, and thus individual, to disappear? Will environmental catastrophes erase mankind? One's own little existence, does it have a meaning? Eckart Hahn's works are highly critical of society, they induce us to reflect on our life. Not everything is predictable, it is like playing roulette, you can win or lose („Autre monde“). Only one thing is sure; things are changing. Each one of us has to decide whether to despair or rejoice. In any case, we haven't yet reached the end of the world.

Iris Poßegger