

Galerie Mezzanin

Katrin Plavcak  
for the birds

Andrea van der Straeten

Animals or animal related creatures play an important role in the images conceived by Katrin Plavcak, as could already be seen in earlier works. At first glance kittens, monkeys, goats – like on Heidi's mountain pasture – dogs and even domesticated wildcats bring to mind a cuddly toy world that has come to life, or the “humanisation” of animals, as it confronts us almost Disneyfied in the entertainment industry. However, also in these earlier works the look of the animals, and more too, gives away something about the people occupied with them, something about the world behind this “I'm playing with my animals” facade. They tell of ambivalent feelings, sidelong, calculating, evil glances from the corner of the eye, wide open eyes full of terror and fear.

In her new works this ambiguity also reaches the animal figures themselves: appearing here are no longer the dog or the kitten, but they are also not the swan, the eagle, the swallow or even the dove, i.e. birds with a “faultless character record” in the canon of allegorical interpretations. Instead they are those, such as the raven commuting between north and south, east and west, who don't give a (bird-)shit about immigration regulations and migration rates. A high percentage of crows and ravens which live with us in Vienna are from Ukraine, and the natives among them, as so-called daily commuters, put themselves to the trouble of considerable arrival and departure routes, they come for example from the Waldviertel in the early morning looking for food in the city and in the evening they fly back to their “suburbs”. (Boku/ Ornitholog. Institute).

A painting by René Magritte from 1938/39 entitled “The Present” shows an eagle dressed in a black jacket. Katrin Plavcak's chicken run, with its hierarchical order where prancing chickens with clearly human legs listen to the puffed up black cockerel, once again ironically takes up such a satirical metamorphosis of animals towards the human social structure or vice versa.

Ravens, chickens, owls... the “birds”, to whom Katrin Plavcak virtually dedicates her work, all have an ambivalent image, a dark side. The raven, originally the holy animal of the goddess Athena, is swift and shrewd but also gossipy, and because of his indiscretion Apollo is supposed to have changed his white feathers into grim black which from then on would be associated with misfortune and death. And the owl, who replaced the raven at Athena's side, is regarded as a symbol of knowledge and wisdom but also as a herald of impending downfall and approaching death. Via biblical Edom it is written in Isaiah, “But the cormorant and the bittern shall possess it; the owl and the raven shall dwell in it...”

If we recognise the image of an owl in the fire and smoke in the sky over a bombed city – Beirut? – it is not only catching sight of a herald of death but also the possible perception of an order of causality because the owl eyes, which untypically for birds are next to each other, and the feather ears lead us to surmise a human face. It is no Biblical blast of fire that has come down upon the city, it is consciously placed and socially sanctioned aggression that we know under resounding names from military tactics and which serve the power-political interests and strategies of securing – and distributing – resources, which we always know about but which are never spoken aloud.

“Because the author is convinced that criticism of human failings and vices can also be the subject of painting, from the multitude of extravagances and follies that each human society has in common and from among the vulgar prejudices and deceits that are sanctioned through custom, ignorance or self-interest, he has selected themes for his work that he considers particularly suitable to provide him with material for the ridiculous while at the same time stimulating his artistic imagination.”

These lines appeared in 1799 on the front page of the Spanish daily newspaper *Diario de Madrid* announcing the series of “*Caprichos*” by Francesco Goya, from which the best-known etching could have been a stimulus for Plavcak for the design of the sky over Beirut: “*The Dream of Reason Produces Monsters*”. It depicts a sleeping artist with owls and bats menacingly flocking together in the darkness above his head.

However, what Katrin Plavcak hauls up from the pool of (art-)historical positions is not only a visual quotation that is effectively recharged with present social and political potential for conflict, it is something that should be regarded as far more important and gripping with regard to the current discourse about artistic positions between social criticism and a social worker image on the one hand and aesthetic design and autonomous artistic self-assertion on the other: the right to and insistence upon an “excess of the imagination”. This quotation from Goya’s work stands for such a connection between imaginative excess and a concentrated and enlightening view of social circumstances.

The work of art “begins in the unconscious that precedes everything technical. Whoever does not affirm this source produces only a work of deliberation.”  
(Letter from Schiller to Goethe from 27.3.1801)

This “unconscious” or, perhaps better, “daydreamy” conjunction of found motifs from the canon of painting with our present medialised perception, which is less determined by factual space-time limits and far more by limits determined by our emotional restrictions, prejudices and our reserve, accounts for the magic of these pictures – or the objects with which the pictures enter into a kind of visual dialogue. These objects made from press board seem to quote forms of housing in an exemplary way but can also be read differently in association with the pictures. As prevention almost become sculpture, one brings to mind water tanks mounted on flat roofs in dense urban areas to enable prompt fire control; in its economic stringency another brings to mind makeshift or emergency coffins with their rejuvenation from the shoulder area to the feet. The images of media reporting have inscribed themselves in our visual repertoire. In art there is no longer anywhere beyond the media, as Peter Weibl recently expressed it. The (in a positive sense) unscrupulous use of known motifs and techniques, their daydreamy combination with unexpected moveable scenery from present-day experience of reality, found with the help of excess, and the flying over all types of terrain as well as various markers of artistic territory bring freedom. Also an artistic position. With this in mind: ... for the birds...