

Hemma Schmutz: You were just 39 when you took on the Main Exhibition Hall at the Secession, delivering an impressive exhibition. Now you're presenting a solo show in Vienna once more, this time at Semperdepot. What has changed since that first major show?

Katrin Plavčák: In the *Human or Other* exhibition at the Vienna Secession I wanted to focus on the idea that we human beings are tied to our planet. I approached this subject through various methods, like painting, wall drawings, a music video, and sculptures made from a variety of materials, including a large wooden mustache on the façade of the building. The exhibition was centered around Jo Kittinger's dive back to Earth. In the 1960s he had risen up into the stratosphere in a helium balloon. He survived the fall from an altitude of 4,000 meters, and is a recognized pioneer of space travel. Apart from that, there was a series of paintings that showed things like an entomopter (a flying robot that explores Mars), as well as an abstract constellation that can also be viewed as the components of a former star. The images also showed a number of terrestrial themes, such as dinosaurs with politicians' heads, or the encounter of an astronaut with inhabitants of outer space. For me, the question behind all of this was whether humanity will extend the colonization that took place in the past into outer space, or whether it might be possible for a new paradigm to emerge in which resources are no longer ruthlessly exploited and depleted as they have been on Earth. In the exhibition at Semperdepot I want to restrict myself to one art form and make an exhibition with a homogeneous group of works. The installation consists of fifteen interrelated image objects that have come out of my studio in recent years. Each of them consists of two wooden panels, painted on both sides, shaped with a jigsaw and then fastened together at a right angle. The idea came to me because I wanted to endow the images with a certain autonomy vis-à-vis the wall, and also to satisfy my desire to keep the authorship of the objects somewhat open at the end of the creative process. The panels can be fastened together in different combinations, resulting in different image sculptures. The viewer circles the objects, and in her mind and according to my idea, the images join together, forming new combinations. So while at Secession I had the urge to dive into a particular subject with a wide variety of methods, this time there will be just one form, while the subjects scamper wildly through the images.

In 2002 you went to Berlin, where you were involved in a range of major exhibitions. What influence did it have on your work to be in a new city, and what is it like to be working in Vienna again?

I wanted a change of scene and needed an affordable studio. Above all, I wanted to get away from a political climate dominated by the ÖVP and FPÖ. In 2002 Schüssel and Haider's governing coalition had just been sealed, and just like in 2017, the right wing played the enablers to power-hungry politicians in the ÖVP. I wasn't the only one feeling depressed by the fact that a third of the Austrian population voted for the right.

In Berlin, I got into placing objects in the way of my images. I made them out of papier mâché and painted them (black smoker hydrothermal chimneys at the bottom of the ocean, for example) or suspended meteorites and umbrellas from motors to make them rotate. So all of them were unstable, swinging bodies that represent, among other things, units of the biosphere and that probably also reflected my own unsettled situation. At the same time, I became interested in the figure of Subcomandante Marcos, who was involved in the struggle of the indigenous people of Chiapas for control of their land. I was increasingly concerned with the issue of land-grabbing and with alternative ways of living.

Before you went to university you trained as a social worker. How did you become more involved in art and how does your commitment to social issues carry on into your artistic work?

I'm a curious person and I'm interested in other social milieus. No doubt adventurousness and a certain voyeurism play a role in that. I pay attention to sociopolitical issues and the way that the political class responds to them. Social work itself is difficult and I found it hard to take. Now, themes from that world are entering into my artistic work. During the time when I was a social worker, I was able to observe things in connection with addiction, prison, and prostitution that I wouldn't have the chance to witness today. Then a friend of mine, Christian Platny, applied to study at the Academy, and I began to see how it was possible to make art the center of your life. Night shifts at the probation agency also financed a large part of my art degree.

Your professors at the Academy of Fine Arts Vienna could not have been more different. What did you learn from Wolfgang Hollegha and Sue Williams?

Yes, that's true. It was very interesting for me firstly to witness the old masterclasses—which were all taught by men—giving way to a new generation of women professors such as Sue Williams or Renée Green, and then also to shape that process a little myself through my work with the Austrian Students' Association.

Aside from that, there had already been a noticeable shift in the painting tradition in Hollegha's class. I think he sometimes thought he'd walked through the wrong door when he'd come into class and suddenly we're all making figurative paintings. We were particularly amused by his reaction to a painting by Mirjana Rukavina that depicted a number of well-painted penises. After looking at it briefly, he asked, "Are these noses?" With Sue Williams, everything in the hierarchical relationship between student and professor changed, and many taboos relating to the practice of painting (apart from my own) were discarded. We started discussing painting in an international context, and Sue Williams is now a friend of mine. Her way of dealing with difficult subject matter and of meandering between the abstract and the figurative has certainly been a major influence on me.

For many years you've played in various bands. How would you describe the link between visual art and pop and the ways they inspire one another?

In a band, the emphasis is on working together and listening to each other. And making noise, being loud. The exciting thing is to play live, to play well in the moment, and to experience the spontaneous response of the crowd. By contrast, my artistic work in the production of images mostly takes place alone, and the creative process doesn't always look pretty. (laughs) And yes, the themes flow back and forth between the artistic work and the song lyrics. For me, Roger, one of my guitars, built by an instrument maker of the same name, is a real character with whom I play together, but also appears in my image world and takes on different roles, as you can see in a number of different paintings. Just as in music I'm interested in the twisted, unfamiliar time signatures, for instance, or strange sounds and noises, and poetic texts that use words to conjure up images, so in art I'm excited about things that are on the margins of the zeitgeist, that are humorous, frivolous, and not clear. I

want to see and hear art that can't be easily categorized, and I admire it when people devote themselves to something intensively and discover an inimitable form all of their own.

Where do you find the inspiration for the subject matter of your projects and images? Speaking generally, one could say that there is a balance in your paintings between interior and exterior perspectives. On the one hand, the images reflect private situations and moods; on the other, you continually refer to current political situations and events. How are these two emphases related to one another?

I think of myself as something like a sponge that is continually soaking up topics and images, as if drawing them in from outside through a semi-permeable membrane, and vice versa. I have Deutschlandfunk and Ö1 to thank, because for me programs like *Wissenschaft aktuell* (Science Today) are veritable treasure troves of inspiration. I also like to read a lot. Certain words set off chains of association in me or prompt me to puzzle over different terms. A report about Nagorno-Karabakh upsets me and I begin to develop ideas that respond to the word I've heard, and to cross-pollinate them with items from my archive or things that I find on the internet. My artistic production is a way of relating to the world, of orienting myself in the world.

In recent years you've created several public art projects. Do commissions like the one in Oslo, the monument to Falco, or the sculpture in Esterhazy Park in Eisenstadt provide you with a welcome change from your work in the studio?

The exciting thing about public art projects is that you also get reactions from people who don't otherwise engage so much with contemporary art. The reactions are mostly very direct and uncalculating, and if the work is successful then the location benefits from the art. Apart from that, it's lovely to create something lasting that doesn't disappear into storage at the end of the exhibition, as otherwise happens. Of course, it's an entirely different way of working compared to making work in the studio. Projects like that emerge in close collaboration with a workshop or with colleagues who assist me in the work. It's a very good feeling, to go from the initial conception, to the model and the calculations that relate to the execution, to the finished work, and then ultimately to stand in front of it. In all of the cases you mentioned there was also always a point of crisis that had to be dealt with, and I always had artist colleagues by my side who helped me get through it. With these commissions, the theme of the work is provided to me externally and I engage with it through intensive research. In the case of the Falco monument, for example, I met with Edek Bartz and talked with him about his experiences as Falco's tour manager. The moment of the breakthrough is very important for me—the moment when I find my perspective on the issue and see how a certain implementation of the idea might also be interesting for others.

For several years now you've explored a new, installative way of presenting your paintings in the form of free-standing pictures. How did you arrive at this brilliant idea, and what possibilities does this group of works offer, in your view?

In 2018 Norbert Pfaffenbichler invited me to participate in the exhibition *Was vom Kino übrig blieb* (What Remained of Cinema) at the Künstlerhaus Graz, which sought to approach the subject of film through the avenue of art, but which was also filled with many other artifacts. Several colossal, bloody, papier mâché arms, shrunken heads, and giant lizards

from the splatter and horror films of Jörg Buttgereit were on display, for example. Norbert asked me to design pictures for the space, and I immediately thought of the cardboard cut-out figures that you see displayed in cinemas. That's how I developed the first five image sculptures. Using the offcuts from these large free-standing pictures I then upcycled a small series of table sculptures, the parts of which are also able to be swapped with one another, my pluck and tuck paintings, which also involve a relinquishment of control and authorship.

In recent years you've had a series of important solo shows in international art institutions in London and Germany. They've included a focus on current European politics and psychoanalysis. How do you arrive at your themes and how long and how intensively do you prepare for such exhibitions?

For the *House of Lots* exhibition at the Stanley Picker Gallery in London I found a starting point in the book *Against Elections* by David Van Reybrouck. He describes a method of responding to the election fatigue that citizens feel by introducing a system of lots into the democratic electoral system. At the time, I was extremely interested in electoral behavior in the UK, in Brexit, and in right-wing populism in Europe. I heard Chantal Mouffe's talk as part of the Wiener Stadtgespräche and also a dialogue between Franz Fischler and Ulrike Guérot, who initiated the European Balcony Project together with Robert Menasse, and who call for the introduction of a European passport, and even now, those two talks strike me as groundbreaking. The intensity of my preparation for an exhibition depends on the institution with which I work. In the case of the Stanley Picker Gallery, director David Falkner asked that I engage in a written conversation with Dr. Eglė Rindzevičiūtė from Kingston University London. He also made it possible for my band Kinky Muppet (at that time still known as Chicken) to record at the university's Tony Visconti Studio and to play a concert there. On the other hand, the exhibition *On The Couch* in the Schwartzsche Villa Berlin involved a multi-week residency. I prepared the exhibition and the catalog together with an intern from London. Meanwhile, the Falco monument was being finished at the Stahl und Form workshop. Back in Vienna, I was interested in working on the Baroque and opulence and Freud and psychoanalysis. And also, in my studio there's a blue sofa, on which I did portraits of several of my friends.

Humor plays a major role in your work—which is also clear from the titles for your projects or images. At the same time, your images are often concerned with politically or socially significant themes, not to mention heavy ones. Does humor create a distance that makes it possible to enter into these topics?

Yeah, it's true that you can approach difficult issues with humor. It's similar with those that are taboo or to which I have an ambivalent attitude. For me, the titles of my paintings are a further component of the painting, and I sometimes keep changing them until they feel right. In his 1905 book *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, Freud describes jokework as a deviation from normal thinking, a production of nonsense. In a pun, a displacement occurs, the way words coalesce and express double meanings generates surprise. The joke addresses itself to the two major tendencies, pleasure and aggression, and the pleasure it yields is triggered by the fact that an inhibition no longer has to be maintained. What do cars like to eat best of all? Parking Lots-a' Noodles!

Are there any artists from the history of art who you've studied particularly intensively? Have your interests changed over the years?

When I started working in painting, artists such as Sue Williams, Nicole Eisenman, Luc Tuymans, Alex Katz, R. B. Kitaj, and the CoBrA group were important for me. René Magritte and Henri Matisse, George Grosz and Otto Dix are all-time favorites of mine. Now I find artists like Jim Nutt, or others from the Chicago Imaginists or the Hairy Who inspiring. They were brought to my attention by Marcus Weber, a friend from Berlin whose painting I also really admire. Other favorite artists of ours are James Ensor and Peter Saul. Currently I'm looking at a lot of naïve art. I like the way that people, animals, and things are depicted according not to their actual size but to their importance for the image. Whole scenes and sequences are painted and the perspective is distorted, or entirely disposed with. The subjects are different, too, and the issue of the need for academic training takes a back seat. In doing research into women painters from the history of art, Florine Stettheimer and Charlotte Salomon have become very important to me.

One could refer to some of your works as modern historical paintings, for example the large painting *The European Parliament* from 2018, or 2015's *Is She a Lady?*, a fictional meeting of women artists. How have you sought to redefine a traditional genre with these works?

What interests me about history paintings of the past is that they bear witness to their time and thus hold up history to our view. Of course scenes of political violence have often been depicted, such as in Édouard Manet's *The Execution of Emperor Maximilian* or Jacques-Louis David's *The Death of Marat*. But *The Raft of the Medusa* also reminds us of how rich shipowners made it to safety while leaving poorer travelers to certain death. And we should also take a very critical approach to the interpretation of the way that Francisco Goya depicts the Spanish royal family (*Charles IV of Spain and His Family*) or documents the horrors of war in his prints *Desastres de la Guerra*. The painting *The European Parliament* was shown in the context of the exhibition *House of Lots* at the Stanley Picker Gallery in London. It raises the question of women leaders in Europe. There was the tradition in Flemish painting of large group portraits of different guilds, for example the banquet of the crossbowmen, or group portraits of officers or doctors, etc. In any case, always a pile of men who paid to have their face on the painting and thus made a point of being easily recognizable. In 2012, together with Caro Bittermann and Claudia Zweifel I developed the website thehistoryofpaintingrevisited.weebly.com, which aims to present women painters from the last few centuries and make them visible. Very famous and successful in their time, they were soon ignored by the historiography of art. I wanted these two large paintings, *Painting History Revisited*, from 2012, and *Is She a Lady?*, to gather some of the women protagonists from across several centuries who are important to me. For me, in terms of my own development, they are my role models, and I prefer to take my cues from Lavinia Fontana, Judith Leyster, and Maria Sibylla Merian than from Rembrandt and Tintoretto.

Thank you so much for the interview.