

Portrait de Jeunes Filles

For Markus Draese

Everything that you can be for each other is just a pretty or an ugly excuse for a feeling of your own.

Alexander Lernet-Holenia

They seem to be somehow distant, even foreign to themselves. Always a little uncomfortable to be near – near to the viewer, to themselves: the works of Markus Draese. But not because they are presumptuous or have elitist aspirations. No, it is for their own sakes that they keep a distance to the things that were the reason they were made, and to their essence. And because they are wary of familiarity they are all the better able to come right up close to the magic that lies behind all things, behind a street, a bar, a brow – much closer than if they were to try to come near.

Figurative painting is going through a new high, and gallery windows are full of all kinds of neo-figurative works, pseudorealism and slogans, so that it seems that the only way to get a message across is to overdo it. The cautious reservation with which the observer and flaneur goes about things, taking them in slowly and then presenting them again, seems as anachronistic today as those once loud cries that painting itself had died. Because there is nothing that is loud and spectacular. And since the coincidental is nowhere a mere attitude, there is also nothing that is not important: not one single row of houses along the street, nor the parked vehicles, the passers-by in a train through the city, the back of the neck of the head of a girl turning away in a café.

And the more these things are given the artist's quiet attention, the more they gain meaning in his hands, releasing their private selves

and becoming just as vulnerable as their author himself. They are melancholic too. For quietness is always somehow melancholic. The encounters that speak in these pictures are without words, even when a pair of eyes looks directly out of the picture and this gaze meets with that of the viewer. There is still hardly more contact than in a fleeting encounter on the street, which only a second later is replaced by the next encounter. We are all left with the strange feeling that this could have been our destiny if only it were capable of more than the ephemeral meeting of two brief glances.

Many of his pictures articulate this peculiar moment. This is true both of the paintings and the graphic work. The drawings are often only slight sketches that record what was presented to the eye quickly before things change and set up another equally transitory situation. The contours are firm, seldom doubled, as if intended to strengthen or reassure themselves. There are only few instances of hatching used to differentiate between dark and light. Sometimes levels that would have been mutually exclusive penetrate each other – a shoulder in front of a car, for example – but as they shine through they are not less concrete for it: does not art ultimately create its own reality. And is it not the case that this can steadily outdo the other reality.

The sketches are like musical scores, and they produce their own clarity of sensual impressions, environments and urban spaces. Scenes, full of life or empty of people, like camera perspectives and cuts, precise as they trace the lines of gestures, and never indecent. Seeing a sketch of three people in conversation, you would almost like to think you can hear them talking. Then you would not be listening for their actual words, but for the sound of their conversation. Interiors, figures, buildings. In many cases the line of the pencil is reduced to a minimum, a brief description, always characteristic, and a productive source of impressions for the paintings. This is the high art of drawing that not least proves its worth through omis-



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on: a figure there, a mere zigzag, denotes a tree, several trees, or a group of them in contour, with space and light shining through so exactly that the only conceivable association is that of the small group of trees by the street. The use of lines and strokes is masterly, and has no need to flout its own mastery: the area of broad hatching before a tender horizon of buildings just has to be the edge of a field, and nothing else.

It may seem strange that his paintings can be even more intimate than the sketches, in spite of their large spaces and formats, their masterly technique, and their nearly classical sense of form. This intimacy is founded in the choice of subject matter, but not only there, and rather more in the gestures that the subjects have assumed. Here too things that seem close up are far away, and the hand that the viewer might be tempted to stretch out towards the pictures hesitates and stays still, so as not to destroy this moment of decisive balance. This moment lingers so long as there is no forceful advance and no false words are said. There is an image of the author himself, his gaze is sceptical. And he turns away, almost hidden in the space of his studio. The surface remains blueish, which could be a result of the reflection on the window-pane, segmenting the space quasi con-

structively, and, if it is a window pane, also dividing it. On the margins the shapes of people, whoever they are. Even in the café, as an outline, a phantom: the pictorial space is completely divided into facets that seem only to be hinted at, in remarkable perfection. The sound of warm tones is preferred, even the cooler areas are not cold. Flooded with light, as if the objects themselves were beginning to shine forth. And as if the objects that are in turn standing in their light are losing their precise contours, as if the aperture of a camera had been set a little out of focus. And yet the sheen of the colours, the incredible mastery of the representation is so real, and creates the illusion that the viewer feels placed among the guests in the café, at the bar, opposite the girls, behind their backs, as they gaze out of the door and the window onto the bright street. Their physicality exudes an equally sublime and seductive attraction. The corporality of these figures is so compelling that it cannot be negated even when a scarlet veil is laid across the whole surface of the picture, where this corporality surprisingly opens up to become a set of coloured lines, the hint of a silhouette, the colours that lie beneath, with the quality of a sketch, and when the superimposed shade still shines through, made more intensive by the shade that it covers. Suddenly



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the representation turns out to be purely painterly, a painting that is both demanding, complex and time-consuming as a technical feat and also a playful and sensual act. This is not just due to the structure, the pure shining colours, the cool light that is reminiscent of the Florentine Renaissance, which for all its corporality was always imbued with a quite intangible beauty.

The apparently unfinished areas are equally indicative of the intention and the technique of the work and also of its stringent composition. At the same time the fact that things are left open reinstates distance in the face of proximity. Like the view through a window to a beautiful young woman, the Japanese woman at the next table. There is no getting near, no flirt, no furtive glances, but perhaps there is longing. There is a fundamental necessity at work here, for to see and to reproduce the world it is necessary to come at it from a distance, as too much proximity would make reflection impossible. This is also the reason why the work cannot become too effusive. The particular ambivalence of these pictures is best seen – and most movingly – in the portraits of young women, which do not in



o.T. (SwS), 1996 – 98, 130 cm x 140 cm, Öl/Leinwand



o.T. (Modell I) 1997, 55 cm x 45 cm, Öl/Leinwand

fact represent a real object; some of them are quite deliberately titled “Model”. But they also distance themselves from the ideal of the fashion model that they adapt, an ideal that is founded on an artificial world of unreal beauty, as seen in the faces of the models as aesthetic, empty and void of spirit: there is no expression, for they exist only to transport products. In these paintings, however, the “models” fail to be meaningless and attractive, and these shoulder portraits before an undefined background take on expressions of characteristic charm, magic and a great deal more than their counterparts were ever intended to possess: personality, being. And a disturbing presence.

Ingres, renowned like no other for his remarkable paintings of women, was asked how he did it. His answer – dead or alive, he was an admirer of women. This was understatement, for admiration alone is not sufficient; rather it is necessary to have the ability to make a face compelling beyond its initial attraction, even when it is turning away – to capture what is beyond the material and the membrane. Something that cannot be described. An incredible sense of being alive – as here. What will happen next.

Gerhard van der Grinten