Heji Shin
December 10 - January 29, 2017

Heji Shin's portraits of newborns are completely unambiguous. They are neither indirect nor referential. If they have to be a metaphor for something mumbling under the surface, then it might be for a sort of labour that isn't - unfortunately or not - open to everybody. And if these days, the uncertainty of what is real and what is a made up story, what is the right thing to do and what is just holing up in the safe space of solid middle class seems prevalent, then this view on giving birth which as an action has always been a strangely bargained subject in patriarchy, hazily lingering between mythology and private little book of horror, can become something that is beyond the doubts and clouds. Though this doesn't make it necessarily easier to bear. Looking away here comes as an option as well.

One of the more mysterious series of Ull Hohn paintings of the early nineties depict around five bodies of newborns captured in the first movements after leaving the womb. Defensive and defenseless maneuvers of their limbs - arms, legs, hands and fingers suggest to be read as an expression of complete dissatisfaction with their new ambience. The colors are classic carnation, pale pinkish light muddy peach, adding a drip of plum for the brownish traces of blood through the filter of the Gerhard Richter-style blur which renders them more photographic of course. Ull Hohn's aim was to paint something „desperately vulnerable and ideological"*.

I suppose looking at a historically defined skin color through the painterly subject of a -by a closer look- linguistically not-yet-defined subjectivity reflected back on the pains and identity politics that lied within and came as a consequence of this very normativity.

Considering the discourse on photographic portraits within Heji Shin's work, the babies here are spotted at a remarkable point in time. No one has ever seen them before and they will never look like this again. It's once more (referring to previous works she made) a moment of suspension from the diverse obligations of various self-representations.

Not surprisingly, as Heji Shin mentioned after having witnessed a couple of natural births by now, there is a scene from the Exorcist (1973) coming to mind when thinking of a moment comparable in bluntness and immediacy to the multicolored heads appearing between two legs (which turn into popeye-like arms from this perspective). It's the stream of pee coming out of under Regan's nightgown hitting the carpet with a very special sound. Shortly before she had whispered - still with the voice of a little girl: You will die up there to an attending astronaut. Later not only her voice will have significantly changed when she is finally addressing the priest: Your mother sucks cock in hell.

Regan and Reagan

The demon that is speaking through Regan has the mannerism to say exactly what triggers the greatest fear, the one thing that should not be said out loud because it exactly manifests the crucial part of the anxiety. The sculpture consisting of a quite common sex-toy and other items like a fried egg and cigarette-butts on top respectively on the side, is called Morning in America. It's relating to how Reagan used to start his speeches to the people. Morning isn't that far from mourning, at least not through the intercontinental phone-connection, I was confused at first. These sculptures might be considered as collages made from some unconscious archetypal trigger motives which also populate the diverse attempts to find a narration/explanation for the disappearance of the real. Conceived as an (post-apocalyptic) exorcism, the sculptures are stripping bare the puppet master in letting collapse in plain sight a couple of the more or less repressed individual hedonisms coming to pass at leisure time. sex, (non-consensual) sex, pills, terror…

* This quote comes from Tom Burr in: http://cargocollective.com/fionnmeade/Restless-Painting-Mousse. Most of the other thoughts on Ull Hohn's newborn series are relating to notes from Hannes Loichinger

~ Inka Meissner