

JACKY STRENZ

Galerie

MATTHIAS DORNFELD

Hoba!

September 21 – November 11, 2012

“Hoba” is the magic word, which enabled Matthias Dornfeld during a summer in the Norwegian mountains to persuade a flock of goats to return with him to the valley every night. Only this signal would spur the semi-feral animals into a joint gallop – a burst of herd instinct Dornfeld remembers on an archaic experience of unfettered and yet strangely directed energy.

Used as the title of an exhibition, “Hoba!” again connotes a summoning of disparate elements in order to create equally archaic images.

Turning towards and turning away, approach and withdrawal, presence and absence – a 19th century painter wanting to depict these chief ingredients of social relations, he had to garnish them with paraphernalia giving evidence of his technical skills. In Manet's *La bar aux Folies-Bergères* for instance we encounter the averted gaze of the person facing us only amidst the intricate minutiae of a busy restaurant.

Just as Manet's protagonist, Dornfeld's characters too vacillate between head-on confrontation and insurmountable separation. A sense of alienness arises from mask-like expressions, at times increased by an archaic smile: remote faces emitting impervious looks.

Indeed those eyes seem like one-way glasses, fixing their gaze on us without revealing anything about themselves. But by the same token this feeling of rejection arises from material barriers being thrust between the onlooker and their object. Compact planes like the one keeping us at a distance from Manet's waitress, along with horizontal stripes. The latter may push the central figure back, like in the case of *Good morning*, another time they prevent us from reading signs on a yellow plane as a decorated vessel.

In addition the interpretation as a 'vase' – embodiment of emptiness become form – is thwarted by emphatic references to the shape's ultimate nature. Ceci n'est pas un vase. Trickle of paint and unmodulated flatness refute presentational modes of understanding and allow for further associations: eyes, their glances intersected by the aforementioned stripes? Or a scutcheon – the classical weapon against attempted rapprochement?

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Any objectifying concepts are forestalled by emphasizing the painting's materiality. A dark edging reminds us that it is a finite plane we're looking at, instead of a window in the wall. Splashes and drips document spontaneous occurrences, whereas thickly layered colours are indicative of time-consuming procedures. An aureole made of colourful curls has us look back into previous states of works that hide the former playful development of shapes beneath intensely mixed hues. Even light zones, still covered with various layers of paint, portend anterior stages, reinforcing the difference between the primal canvas' emptiness on the one hand, and white colour as the result of a prolonged development on the other.

What is depicted are blankspaces – mere absences, ready to be filled with any projection, yet of a strangely haunting presence. Marks instead of bodies, outlines rather than volume, no qualities but signs.

This restriction to fragments invests these tokens with universal validity. Dornfeld's figures aren't so much likeness as rather propositions: overly long necks separate head and body, thinking and doing, transforming the trunk into mind's pedestal – nothing more, nothing less.

Missing hands impede any action. In various cultures this supposed passivity is considered a spiritual achievement, by which deities evince freedom from human bustle.

Having no legs to walk on, let alone feet to ground them firmly on the earth, the figures are immovable – or unmoved? While immobility, similar to the attitude of not-doing mentioned above, is regarded as an expression of timelessness, motionlessness however alludes to some kind of inner strength. Rigidity becomes stability.

Interpretations like these aren't of much interest to the painter, to whom subjects are a mere pretexts to let the creative means have their will. Art historical schemes – bust, triad, still life – serve as points of reference for an open-ended process, where anything may happen except for that which can be predicted. As soon as routine sneaks in - the temptation to repeat what has proven successful, to parade one's bravura – Dornfeld resorts to an established method of interference in an all too sleek image: controlled coincidence. This way opening up for involuntary impulses enables him to surprise himself again. In so doing unleashed processes will be reunited to complete paintings by means of a vigorous “Hoba!”

Text: Charlotte Lindenberg