

Julian Göthe

“Painted White in a Spirit of Rebellion”

25 April – 1 July 2003

opening reception Friday, 25 April, 7-9 pm

On the occasion of his first solo exhibition, Berlin artist Julian Göthe (b. 1966) is showing a space-filling, folded-paper sculpture in the display window of the Antiquariat Buchholz.

Julian Göthe has chosen the antiquarian bookstore window as the ideal context for his work, relating as it does to the forms of display and interior design used in the elegant window-dressing of luxury shops and above all in film sets. The period that particularly interests him stretches from Art Deco in the Thirties and Forties to Stil Novo in Italy in the Fifties. This was precisely the period when decorative art transformed currents in the Modernist avant-garde, which had tended to be characterised by functionalism, into variations that were as glamorous as they were idiosyncratic.

From the Thirties famous Hollywood set designers like Cedric Gibbons, Van Nest Polglase, or Hobart Erwin and Frederick Hope started to incorporate the Modernists' ideas for utopian interiors into their ultra-fashionable rooms, and these were instrumental in establishing the glamorous theatrical world of Busby Berkeley's film musicals and the image of an elite upper-class in the films of George Cukor.

Cedric Gibbons for example describes how the Bauhaus style, which was originally based on mass-production and an aesthetic derived from engineering, or the International Style, which he first saw at the 'Arf Décoratif' exhibition in Paris in 1925 were the inspiration for his all-white film interiors, the 'Big White Sets'.

As in Art Deco in general, an elegant style had crystallised in Hollywood film sets which reduced the formal symbols of Modernism to fossilised props. Pointed shapes, cubist fragmentation and machined surfaces now fulfilled the demands of Modernism only in a symbolic sense, and their actual material construction was no longer functional. On the contrary, the designers – in a vein that one might call escapist – favoured expensive materials that were difficult to work with. These became the hallmark of a privileged Modernism which, especially in the America of the Thirties, and therefore at a time of economic depression, became a fetishistic locus for wealth and elegance, precisely as shown in the Hollywood movies of the time.

The colour 'white' in the 'Big White Sets' and in the very smart white interiors takes on a very ambivalent role. On the one hand it is the signifier for Modernist purism, the non-colour of progress and functionalism. On the other hand 'white' is the most distinguished of all colours, which in all its possible gradations can give any interior an elegant and opulent all-over effect, and provide a background against which the actors can appear perfectly lit in their unapproachable artificiality.

In the white interiors in films of the Thirties and Forties, objects of fanciful design are invested with psychological symbolism. Eccentric furniture, often of extreme design, produces a mood of suspense and evokes menace and terror. The Italian furniture designer Renzo Zanovella, a representative of the so-called Stil Novo of the Fifties, appeals to Julian Göthe not least because of the intrinsic appearance of his furniture. Zanovella furnished fashionable Italian hotels exactly like public transport interiors. A striking feature of his designs is the eccentric and individualistic outline of, for example, his chairs. Heavily influenced by the art of the Surrealists, the individual Modernist features of the chairs are so exaggerated that they look like figures and radiate a presence that is as futuristic as it is evil. They could be extras in a horror movie.

The analogy between sharply pointed objects and murder weapons, which we can discern in Italian horror films, is not fortuitous and possibly derives from this design tradition, to which Carlo Mollino and the Frenchman Raphael belong. So in the Dario Argento film *The Secret of the White Glove* the protagonist sees a figure behind the glass frontage of gallery of modern art being stabbed among sculptures in particularly pointed forms.