

Galerie Max Mayer

26 Jan 2023

**Galerie Max Mayer
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Flip the Script: Maximiliane Baumgartner's Infrastructure of Care

"If history is no longer an object that can be held and viewed but an infrastructure that can be distorted, deformed, annihilated, and made anew, the question is, on which framework does your history hang, which direction does it face, and how far would we like to move from its trajectory?"¹

Maximiliane Baumgartner is in the business of flipping images, literally and metaphorically.

The literal part first: for her most recent series of works, currently exhibited at the Galerie Max Mayer in Düsseldorf, she repaints images upside down. These images will become part of her layered, conceptual paintings, but we will come back to that. For now, let's stay with the flipped images.

For the works in *WIE DU MIR, SO TEIL ICH DIR (TIT FOR TAT)*, the flipped images are taken from *Elementary Work [Elementarwerk]*, published in 1774. This book by Johann Bernhard Basedow, conceived of as a textbook for children, was supposed to gather in one place the fundamentals of human knowledge and is now regarded as a key contribution to philanthropic pedagogy. It was illustrated by Daniel Chodowiecki with almost 100 copperplate engravings. Basedow's father was a wigmaker. His mother, according to Wikipedia, suffered from "melancholy, almost to [the point of] madness." The son of a wigmaker and a sad woman, Basedow ran away from home when he was 14 and went on to become a writer, teacher and educational reformer. He became one of the most revered thinkers of his time and helped to establish both pedagogy as a scientific discipline and "childhood" as an emerging topic of study. Chodowiecki, on the other hand, had a Polish father and a Huguenot mother. He grew up in Danzig, and moved to Berlin to live with his uncle after the death of his father when he was 16. He became one of the most important painters and illustrators of the period in Germany and produced several thousand etchings. Next to Basedow's seminal work on education, he also provided the visuals for books by Buffon, Lavater and Pestalozzi, some of the most widely read books of the time. His illustrations represent the life of the bourgeoisie in the 18th century in great detail, mostly in comfortable interiors. These two, then, Basedow and Chodowiecki, through text and images respectively, produced archetypes: archetypes of the ideal life within a bourgeois society that believed in science, education, and patriarchal order, an order in which philanthropy plays a fundamental role.

Maximiliane Baumgartner is in the business of archetypes: archetypes that pertain to the field of education.



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What I glean from Chodowiecki's etchings and Basedow's text is an orderly world, one in which discipline and study are punctured by moments of regulated play and conviviality. More narrowly, what I glean from the flipped images repainted by Maximiliane Baumgartner are the following scenes (in order of appearance in Baumgartner's show):

1. Girls and boys engaged in play with various toys: two boys chase each other on wooden horses, a girl pulls another girl sitting in a wagon, a boy pushes a girl on a swing. The children are arranged in pairs.
2. A woman in the process of leaving a room while, through its open door, a carriage is seen waiting outside. As she moves towards the door, her skirt swinging, she seems to be leaving a house in disarray: a child lies on the ground, stretched out; another child stands close to two men who gesture towards the woman, one of whom is holding out his arms as if to say, "Why?" Holding a sharp object in her hand, one could even assume that she has hurt the child on the floor.
3. A court room with two judges sitting on a podium, a group of men in deliberation, speaking to each other as well as with the judges. While the scene looks official – taking into account the architectural setting and the men's attire – the men look comfortable. The scene exudes a concentrated fraternity, a kind of relaxed professionalism. These men are at ease with their setting.
4. A large family is having dinner. Mother and father are at the head of the table, various chairs in various sizes fitting the various ages of the six children present are set around the table. Two children have moved towards the door to bring food to a disheveled looking man, a beggar most likely, who stands in the door frame.
5. An adult, a teacher perhaps, explains something to two boys. One boy points to the floor. The scene is set inside in a spacious room with prominent tiles on the floor that divide the space like a grid.

These are scenes of instruction that communicate gendered hierarchies. Men command and have respected social roles. They lead, abide by institutional structures and are taught to become professionals. Women care for others and take charge of the family, but only in absence of the head of the house – the father. In only one scene is the mood *off*: that of the violent, fleeing mother. This, clearly, is the one bad example among the good.

Baumgartner painted each of these images twice, on two different works that together form a pair. Often, one of the versions is mirrored, with slight variations. Baumgartner calls these pairs sister paintings. It is not only the flipped illustrations that appear in each of these works. They each also contain another image that is placed on top of the flipped illustration. Before moving on to what is depicted in these other layers – and addressing the flip as a metaphor – it's important to stop and notice how the flipped and counter-images are executed. They are formed with fine lines, as if the artist is mimicking a drawing while using the medium of paint. The paint is not applied to a canvas but onto aluminium composite Dibond sheets, which shine through as the background of the painting, variously metallic or matt white. All of the works have unusual shapes in response to the architecture of the space, the Galerie Max Mayer, which is located in the Schmela house, designed by Aldo van Eyck in 1971.

Maximiliane Baumgartner is in the business of expanding painting.



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Over the flipped images and on top of them Baumgartner shows other images:

1. A modernist playground of the sort that Aldo van Eyck designed in Amsterdam and an elementary school building (on top of the scene with the playing children).
2. A dancing woman with a swinging skirt, painted with bold and painterly strokes (atop the scene of the fleeing mother).
3. A portrait of Anita Augsburg, a feminist and the first doctor of law in the German empire, depicted, as the title of the work indicates, "on her way to court in 1906 where she fights police violence against workers," and a depiction of the photographer Sophia Goudstikker, an "autodidact lawyer admitted to the juvenile and criminal court of Munich in 1908." These women at and on their way to work in court are depicted on top and above the courtroom scenes.
4. A hand holding out a hat upside down, into which two persons are reaching, alongside a figure standing behind a lectern (an auctioneer or a painter, perhaps?) in a room filled with paintings; a jar with brushes indicates that we are perhaps in the studio of the artist. These images are paired with the dinner/beggar scene.
5. On top of the instructor with the two boys, Baumgartner has painted a yellow room that holds a more abstract composition: its curvy blue lines are reminiscent of a human figure, perhaps a reclining nude?

To summarize: the flipped-and-repainted images from Basedow and Chodowiecki's book have become parts of painted compositions that confront each of them with a counter image, an image that is linked to the institutional setting depicted in the original picture but in which the related hierarchy has been questioned or itself flipped. Women become the protagonists of the court. Lessons between male instructors and students are met by the contours of an abstracted female nude. The bad example of the mother becomes a dancing figure, free and colorful.

Maximiliane Baumgartner is in the business of countering established narratives and values.

And there is more: like a literal footnote, each pair of paintings is accompanied by a drawing, placed on a low, improvised pedestal made out of bricks. But these are not just any bricks: specifically, they are of the *T-Steine* type produced in the 80s by a company owned by Baumgartner's parents until it went bankrupt before Baumgartner's birth in 1986. The drawings show five buildings: the house of the artist's mother, the Scheidegg elementary school, the Gymnasium Lindenberg, the Academy of Fine Arts in Munich and the Verein für Fraueninteressen e.V. München. The institutions are linked by the artist's biography, having played important parts in her education. When a pair of sisters, which are connected through a system of dots, is sold by the gallery, the owner agrees to give one of the paintings to the institution the work in question is connected to, to Baumgartner's mother for instance, or the Academy of Fine Arts in Munich where the artist studied.

Maximiliane Baumgartner is in the business of giving back.



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In 2009, the art historian David Joselit asked: "How does painting belong to a network?" The essay was an attempt to broaden the set of references connected to the discourse of painting. While Joselit talked about a network in which painting exists, he understood this network to still be largely bound to the infrastructures of the artworld, albeit an artworld that had opened to the new horizon offered by the internet and other digital technologies. When it comes to Baumgartner's layered paintings, the discipline of painting *per se* is only one field or system among the many to which the works are connected. The network, quite narrowly defined for Joselit, becomes *networks*, multiple matrices in which Baumgartner's paintings function as nodes.

Baumgartner makes nodes instead of endpoints; her works are intersections of overlapping systems of meaning at which hegemony and representation meet. While insisting that, in many contemporary situations, 19th-century values are still in effect, she works to counteract them with counter-images that aim to question and provide exits from limiting and discriminating understandings of order. Her means, however, are also formal: she employs contrasting colors, abstraction and gestural brushstrokes to escape the rigidity of the painted/drawn images. And through her system of giving back, her flipped images, which work to undo the hand-me-down stereotypes of a bourgeois education and family structure, are fed back into the educational system, perhaps as gifts, but also as questions in the form of objects that need to be taken care for.

"It is a tradition to build buildings and put people inside them, it is also a tradition to tell others how to act (relate) within these structures, in relation to *history*. History has a set of precedents from which each of our paradigms emerges, and in that sense history is not a fixed object, as it is sometimes suggested, but an infrastructure that codes the ways we have come to understand our own cultures..."²The artist Ruth Buchanan invites us to think of history as textured, embodied and movable infrastructure.

This is what I see in the work of Baumgartner: a textured version of history. Her works are exercises in texturing history by providing new layers and alternatives and by connecting different fields and systems. In setting up a mechanism by which her flipped images are given back to institutions where she once was taught, her reversals of the stereotypes of bourgeois education and family structure are fed back into the educational system. Grounded, as her works are, in the spaces they're shown, their shapes responding directly to the architecture of their setting, they connect the histories they depict with the here and now, as well as with us, the viewers, who may catch ourselves reflected in their mirrored surfaces. But these works also suggest new futures. By manifesting counter-narratives in different institutional settings, they serve as reminders to those who encounter them that things were once ordered differently, and so may still be re-ordered again.

Maximiliane Baumgartner is in the business of setting up a new infrastructure of care.

¹ Ruth Buchanan, *Where does my body belong? From institutional critique to infrastructural transformation. Or Standarts and Mothers* (Vancouver: Artspeak, 2021): 9.

² Ruth Buchanan, *Where does my body belong? From institutional critique to infrastructural transformation. Or Standards and Mothers* (Vancouver: Artspeak, 2021): 9.

