

Art after "nine eleven"

Again and again, the focus of Slawomir Elsner's work is "catastrophe's dazzling beauty". This can be seen, for example, in his series entitled "Kilotons" (2007). At first glance, they are nothing but coloured pencil drawings of south sea islands in blazing colours as we all know them from travel agents' brochures. The second glance, however, reveals that the bright light in the background is that of one of the atomic weapon tests that have taken place there.

The current series "Windows on the World" (2008) also first draws you in with its furious light play and its sensual beauty, and conceptual aspects appear again on the aesthetic master plan in these large-sized coloured pencil drawings. The drawings are based on photos that Elsner took from and in the then still standing World Trade Center in New York in 2001. To be more exact, they were taken from the windows of the "Windows on the World" Club and of the club's interior on the building's 107th floor. Meticulously, the artist has transferred the photos with his coloured pencils and their shimmering colours onto a 1.68m x 1.10m format. The results are views to all points of the compass, for example towards New Jersey and Brooklyn, as well as pictures of the club's inside.

Next to the fascinating surfaces, the conceptual approaches of "Windows on the World", which result from the concurrence of allegedly different aspects and which need to be described in more detail, are enthralling. The media photography and drawing enter into a productive dialogue, and individual experience or recollection clashes galvanically with collective memory.

Firstly about the former: Elsner's dashed application of colour seemingly uses the photos as templates slavishly. He even copies the camera's faults such as accidental blurs. The large size strengthens the almost garish pictures' effect. The result is a nearly pictorial impression. Thus, different gestures entwine each other - those of the tourist's "snap shot", the documentary drawing and pictorial impressions - and nearly dissolve their contrasts in this infusion.

Lastly, the contradictions between individual experience and collective memory turn "Windows on the World" into both a subtle and pleasantly undramatic memorial for "nine eleven". The photographs Elsner took can never again be taken, and the normality of the pictures recalls the forceful destruction of the World Trade Center by not yet again recycling the pictures of the "collapsing towers" that have long become clichés - just as the once existent visual everyday life of the club is reminiscent of its evanescences. And this without moral attitude or political accusation.

The "Windows on the World" are flanked by the drawings "Window 1 - 3" (2008). In these, Elsner

made nearly abstract drawings of black pin boards with little colourful pieces of paper on them. Such pin boards were used by New Yorkers after September 11th 2001 to publicise the names of missing relatives from the World Trade Center. The victim's perspective of "nine eleven" appears more explicitly than in the "Windows on the World". However, it remains cautious and considerate in the tendency to abstraction.

-Raimar Stange

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