

Ausstellungskatalog Jewels of the North, 2008

Jewels of the North

A small isolated house in the picturesque middle of nowhere. Barren and beautiful, an Icelandic landscape as of one of those deeply melancholic crime stories. The deep blue of this work by Claus Kienle is no accident - which other colour expresses better the blues, which the soul feels at such an impression. „398“ in the middle part of this triptych irritates the viewer. What does the three figure-number mean? Free associations are made; possible meanings come and go, stories are told in the own head. „Figure“ is contained in the word „story telling“ [in the German language], and without any doubt, here a story is told, even if you can't actually figure out at first what kind of story. Figures are poetic in their own way, have their own magic life. This is not solved when Claus Kienle finally tells about the artwork's genesis: He had set eyes on this house ‚in the middle of nowhere‘ when the artist couple travelled by bus on the road from Reykjavik to Akureyri in summer 2008. 398 kilometres away. The ambivalent feeling of this special place ranging between beauty and dreariness at the same time ended with the thought ‚Don't ever stop and get off‘ - and in the work „398“.

Claus Kienle's fascination with figures has occurred in his works for some years now. Sometimes a picture is connected with „figures“ from his real life, as in „398“ or as in the polyptych „Akureyri“ as green as grass. Some of his thoughts and consequently his own system of figures have occurred from observing foreign surroundings. This happened e.g. whilst travelling in Iceland - „What's with all the use of ready-rolled grass?“ was the question asked whenever he saw the pervasive use of the prefabricated grass. He ‚translated‘ his observations into ‚gumgraphy‘ on wood, which are subtitled in many places of discovery by their GPS-coordinates.

The sign „13 Manns“ on an Icelandic lift saying how many people could be carried in the lift was of long-lasting interest to Claus Kienle and resulted in the series of art works of the same title. This series shows all the cars he saw when travelling whilst also guessing how many people each car might carry. His reflections and experiences combined with numbers are developed into a highly individual and contextual pictorial language. From what at first appears to be banal situations are distilled into atmospherically dense snapshots of a strangely deserted present.

Whilst Claus Kienle shows his photographs on wood („gumgraphies“) and connects his motifs with numbers, Frauke Hänke puts her photographs onto canvas and embroiders them with lines in different languages. Both artists use the ancient technique of „gumgraphy“ which is almost forgotten in contemporary art. Their technique of exposing their photography on either wood or canvas places these works somewhere inbetween the traditional media of photography and art. Yet each work remains a unique example of this process; however the use of monochrome veers the pictures away from traditional photography and instead one focuses on the particular atmospheric impression that is gained.

While Claus Kienle is inspired by numbers Frauke Hänke is motivated by words. These words, often forming sentences, don't even need to be understood by the viewers in order to stimulate their imagination. After years experimenting with different European languages, Hänke recently used Chinese quotations and here she also uses Icelandic texts. With these languages it's not the original meaning of the word that is crucial but the aesthetics of the characters. The sentences appear like subtitles, like voices from afar being spoken in foreign and obscure languages. The optical rhythms evolve from both intonation and accentuation and one is thus open to imaginative situations or stories behind the pictures from the use of these foreign characters.

It is often from „banal“ nature that the characters originate; the texts are taken from travel guides and brochures or come from handouts and sign posts. However, in the context of each individual work the texts develop their own life and begin to tell a story, at times as atmospherically diffused as are memories

from bygone days.

At first sight the characters seem to be carved into the picture, it's only on closer inspection, however, that the viewer notices the thin silk thread. In Frauke Hänke's earlier works she embroidered the text neatly with thick thread whilst in more recent works her „handwriting“ has become more personal; the characters are seemingly carved into hard ground reminiscent of anonymous graffiti or cave paintings which give the pictures an archaic look.

„Hætta“ is the Icelandic word for „danger“ and here it is the stone hill with its high steam pressure in the midst of a desert landscape which turns out to be dangerous. „Danger“ in five different languages is the title of this photographic pentptych; the translations derive from a warning signpost located near hot springs. From picture to picture the warm, orange-brown colour becomes more intense and one imagines the oncoming heat as well as its ensuing danger. The photograph „Dásamlegur“, on the other hand, is almost calming; the embroidered word which almost dissolves into the blue of the twilight means „wonderful“ in Icelandic. In this work the artist alludes to the well-known Islanders' tendency for mysticism whilst at the same time she expresses her enthusiasm for this exceptional landscape.

„Viðir“ (Icelandic: pasture) is the name of a ship that Frauke Hänke photographed in the port of Akureyri. The words embroidered into the pentptych are showing different views of the ship and form the question, „Hvad ætlar þu að gera?“ („What are you up to?“). In the face of the slightly shifted visual details in the five works the viewer has the sensation of losing his/her foothold on the ground. Words and moving rhythms melt into one hypnotic whole.

An answer to this question might give the reply, „Um miðja nött“ („Around midnight): Eigin skynsemi og dómgreind eru viðast hvar það eina sem hægt er að treysta á þegar aðstæður eru metnar og ákvarðanir teknar. (You will usually have to trust your own common sense when assessing conditions and making decisions.). This sentence is found in the flyer „Traveler's Safety“ published by the Icelandic Association for Search and Rescue. The campsite's panoramic view shows midnight twilight whereas the reddish-brown of the photos form an appealing contrast to the Nordic mood set by the light.

The photos of the works forming a triptych, „Vinsamlegast - snertið ekki líkanið“ (Please - do not touch the model) were taken at Strokkur, one of the most active geysers in Iceland. Every time a group of travelers arrives the tourists gather round the geyser waiting for it to erupt with their cameras held at the ready. Nature's spectacle seems as if it only takes place for the tourists; the artificial scenery, the suspense is all caricatured by the embroidered fountain and the title of the work.

„Das ist das Angenehme auf Reisen, dass auch das Gewöhnliche durch Neuheit und Überraschung das Aussehen eines Abenteuers gewinnt.“ („The everyday experience becomes, with a new and surprising viewpoint, an adventure which is what makes travelling so delightful.“) That was how Goethe characterized in his „Italienische Reise“ („Italian Journey“) how travel is capturing the special sensitivity with which artists perceive an unknown surrounding. With their works referring to their trip in Iceland both Kienle and Hänke use the pictorial language they have developed over many years of intense art production. The pictures are enriched by a lingering mystical element which contributes to the particular appeal of these pictures.

Ulrike Künnecke, Berlin 2008

Translation by Pip Vice, Sydney