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Justine Otto's Female Territory

Girls, women and animals inhabit Justine Otto's world. Her pitiless style of painting is brutally cold. Even when her landscapes are greenish, the temperature hovers around zero. The metallic gleam that characterises her paintings turns her protagonists into beings for whom nothing, truly nothing, is unknown. They carry out their business with curiosity, in a tortured and, possibly, also sadistic way that is always puzzling, being set in a no-man's-land, from which Divine Providence is absent. To this extent there is a remarkable congruence between painting and content: her painting generates the emotional, dissected super cooling of her female figures and even the aggressivity of her animals. For their part, her figures reflect, within this interactive process, a yearning that determines their actions. Here again, their actions are puzzling, sourced from the realm of shadows, which endows the experience of a 'sinister' knowledge with alchemical features. The experience of knowing is present in a perverse and polymorphic way that meanders through organs and feelings as they mutate. The viewer's voyeuristic curiosity corresponds to a review of his or her own urges. To describe Justine Otto's pictures as surreal – as is occasionally the case – would constitute a dramatic belittlement.

These pictures are immensely dangerous; there was a time when zombies popped up, as shadows of our collective past, from an unresolved Other Side. Today, we – and Justine Otto especially – create our own zombies, with no shadows, from projections of our now lonelier selves, laden with a cyber-identity, coupled with fantasies about omnipotence and happiness. This could be termed loss of reality. However, Justine Otto does not talk about this. She speaks about the reality of losing your grip on reality. 'Fairy tales are true', says the artist. What she does is to intensify fairy tale themes by engaging in a medialisation process that blurs their levels of reality. Through the harshness of her pictures, their implacability, Justine Otto creates a reality that is neither overdone nor pathetic, but that touches a nerve in a present time in which extremes are either embedded or exploding, in which the erotic quality of these extremes appear as extended, atrophied, travesties or fetishes of themselves.

When we look at some of her pictures, such as *Dogs of Democracy* (2007, 154 x 200 cm), which shows a girl who appears to be kneeling on a dead mastiff, cutting its back open with a pair of scissors. She is wearing shorts, T-shirt and headphones. The music is helping her concentrate, given that she is surrounded by a pack of mastiffs, one of which is baring its fangs in a scary way. This painting was originally titled *Die Geburt* (The Birth), and it shows a process that is diametrically contrary to our initial impression. It is by carefully cutting out the shape of the recumbent dog that she calls the animal into being, thereby giving expression to a creation myth. World and counter-world meet in a symbiotic exchange. There's an echo of Plato's image of the Cave. The girl looks peaceful. She seems to have created the entire pack. But, what will the hounds do now? Where does the blood trail lead? Is the girl listening to music, or does she hear a crazy voice telling her what to do? Is she creating something, or is she on a mission of destruction?

The painting *Drama & Caruzo* (2008, 200 x 114 cm) shows a young girl lovingly engaged in catching birds. She pierces their bodies and hangs them round her neck on a thread (are the animals still alive?). She is doing something horrid. Children are capable of acting in this way, as if controlled by aliens. The telekinetic strength that young Carrie possesses in Stephen King's novel of the same name (1973) results in a blood bath. The girl in Roman Polanski's film *Rosemary's Baby* (1968) utters obscenities in an altered voice, through green foam-flecked lips. Flora, in Henry James' novella *The Turn of the Screw* (1898), says things that make one gasp, given her innocent youthfulness.

Nevertheless, the girl here is no child. Justine Otto goes a step further. Her perversity mutates into a tenderly loving action, comparable to that of the praying mantis, *Mantis religiosa*, who occasionally bites her mate's head off during the mating process, to improve his sperm flow. The plaintive twittering of the pierced birds, their dying wing-beats are, conceivably, the acoustic trappings of agony and ecstasy. In *Lonestar* (2009, 160 x 130 cm), a girl is holding her hands out at breast height, in the shape of bowls. The thumb that sticks out on the right side resembles the head of a dildo. The girl is gazing upwards at an acute angle, filled with expectation and hope. This is how I imagine St. Teresa of Avila, at the moment when her hands were marked by the stigmata. This hope and longing are fulfilled; some of her fingers display long, red, seductive nails. This girl is mutating into a woman, unaware that the Heavenly Bridegroom is inspired by female natures or, rather, by female energy.

The two women in the painting *Und wenn die Sonne untergeht, strahlen nur noch sie allein* (And when the sun goes down, they alone are still beaming) (2009, 132 x 90 cm) are observing their work attentively: the genetically engineered mutation of hares into wolves. The animals' heads poke out of containers, while their bodies are whirled through the genetic cylinder. The women's features are stern: fit, jogging female scientists with no charisma.

This mutation is a theme and, naturally, also a metaphor. The bird woman with wings and a bird on her shoulder – she has a smooth profile – is watching her mouth in the mirror as it takes on animal features. The disassociated identities of these people, the drifting away from normal associations into a digital world, are part of this mutation process (*Vogelfrau* [Bird woman], 2007, 114 x 180 cm).

The old-looking girl in *Willst du mit mir gehen, ja, nein, vielleicht* (Do you want to go with me, yes, no, maybe?) (2008, 200 x 150 cm) is wearing an ash-blond wig that hangs down to her hips. Close to her, hyenas or wolves are snapping at each other. Dogs are lowering in the background. Does the girl want to look younger? Does she want to be a Lolita? Maybe the girl has quite different intentions to those suggested by the title of this work. Has the wolf stepped out of the *Little Red Riding Hood* story?

These are meaningful connections, which fall apart, and are transformed, without the protagonists appearing to be aware of them.

Justine Otto refers to fairy tales. Their polymorphous perverse natures have always constituted a rich source of material. For this very reason, it is important to keep looking at her *painting*, the way she *structures* her work, and her *inventiveness*.

In *Schattenlinie* (Shadow line) (2009, 240 x 150 cm) there is an upper and lower part. Four girls, wearing short white dresses and wreaths are celebrating May Day. There's a large tree trunk (the

maypole) with coloured ribbons hanging from it. They extend down into the ground, their roots visible. Three dogs, one of them clearly a bitch, are clinging by their teeth to the ribbons. The girls are dancing in a puppet-like manner. One of them is gazing out of the picture, deliberately inviting the viewer to join in the spectacle. The one to the left, who has been cut off by the edge of the painting, is wearing red gloves that cover her elbows. The bitch is clinging to the ribbon that this girl holds.

In the language of fairy tales, the colour red means blood, passion, sexuality. In this case, the situation is reminiscent of the princess in the tower, who let down a rope so that her lover could climb up to her. It is difficult to explain this picture. Are the dogs the girls' alter egos? Are they metaphors for the lust that the girls are surrounded by? Are they playing a consciously cunning game with this lust? It is quite clear that the dogs will not be able to climb up there. If they were to fall down, exhausted, the girls' giggles and bell-like laughter would ring out.

Three women dressed like lab workers are engaged with a huge thorn apple in *Zeit für Plan b* (Time for Plan b) (2009, 200 x 200 cm). It is growing out of a glass container that looks like an aquarium. Six hairdryers on extension arms dispense warm air from various directions. A woman is operating a control unit on the floor which seems to be influencing the thorn apple's rapid growth.

We know that thorn apples are extremely poisonous, and that they were used to make witches' salves and magic brews during the late Middle Ages. They were first used for medicinal purposes in the eighteenth century. The thorn apple in Justine Otto's painting appears to be at least thirty centimetres high. To what end? What are the women plotting?

What is driving the women in *Helter Skelter* (2010, 150 x 220 cm)? The setting shows the inside of a fur factory. The two women are sitting on a ledge, dressed in short red skirts. One of them is wearing gloves and is holding a bulldog on a leash. With her other hand, she is twirling fur balls on a ribbon. She is emphatically androgynous, with masculine features. Her feet have been shoved into high-heeled shoes. The other, feminine, woman, whose open blouse is only partly buttoned-up, is looking at a triangular sign, which has red paint running down it. Justine Otto has referred to accomplices. This may well be so, but there is more to it than that. Their relationship goes deeper. This is what the picture is telling us.

The same applies to *Wer nie sein Brot im Feinripp aß* (Who never ate his bread in a fine-rib) (2009, 150 x 220 cm). A bloody animal skull is lying on the table. A woman on a garden chair has placed her crossed feet on the table. Another woman, who seems rather older, is offering her a scrap of meat on a skewer. The face of the woman on the garden chair reveals her alienation. This scrap of meat, and the somewhat older woman's encouraging glance, exercise an unspoken power over her, an emotional power. The piece of raw meat is both sign and symbol: transubstantiation.

We meet a relationship of this kind again in *Touch of Scham and Hair* (Touch of pubis and hair) (2009, 107 x 160 cm). There's a bloody animal skull in the foreground, with a fork standing upright in it. To the left is a glass bowl filled with apples and grapes. Behind these lie two women, head to head, as if at a banquet in ancient times. Our gaze wanders from the red apples beneath the rucked skirt on the woman who is cuddling up on the left. The two women appear to be the same age, but it seems to me

that the one on the right, behind the animal head, is more in charge. She has only to reach out her hand to grasp the fork with its carved horn handle. Above the two women sways a glittering candelabra, surrounded by bare tree trunks, like a thousand humming wedding bells.

It is women, over and again, who invert the thread of life's warp by applying a subcutaneously disseminated eroticism, which disguises seduction as a weapon.

Maybe *Mikrosteria* (2008, 220 x 150 cm) will provide a key. Inside a trailer we see a chaotic heap of bird houses, of different sizes and styles. Our gaze wanders from the back of the trailer to the window on the opposite side. A woman with a determined expression is throwing another bird house onto the pile. Her features have a masculine quality. The woman is stealing the houses that people have constructed for the birds. On the one hand, Justine Otto is criminalizing the woman. On the other hand, she may be justifying her actions. After all, birds do not need little houses. They can build nests for themselves, and the little houses represent an anthropomorphization of animal behaviour. (This is what the woman in the picture seems to be thinking.)

Whatever the case may be; Justine Otto leaves us guessing. Nevertheless, it is not a balancing act. Her 'amnesia' is too obvious, her depictions in part too monstrous. The burial chamber is filled with nightmares, amalgamated with the artistic drive of a warhorse.

PS: It was only after four hours' intensive conversation with Justine Otto on July 19, 2011, that I was able to write this piece.