

Tales, Lies and Exaggerations

Thomas Mader

Michael Wutz is a Berlin-based artist, well known for his detailed etchings which show a stunning attention to shading and spacial depth. These works have earned him, amongst other awards and recognitions, an artist residency for printmaking at the University of Texas in 2007, the first prize at the Ilse Frankenthal Stichting printmaking competition in 2009 and an exhibition space at this year's Art Cologne. Some of Wutz's works on display at his last solo-exhibition titled *Tales, Lies and Exaggerations* at Aurel Scheibler gallery in Berlin, were inspired by Alfred Kubin's fantastic novel *The Other Side*, that was – interestingly enough – written by an artist, that is first and foremost known for his illustrations.

Michael Wutz talked with Thomas Mader about the influence of literature on his works, the significance of etchings in the year 2010 and the artists role as a certain kind of "Demiurg".

Thomas Mader: Mr. Wutz, how important is the influence of other forms of art on your own works?

Michael Wutz: Literature, music, etc., are often affecting me in a much stronger way, than painting for example. I think the reflection on a certain topic can manifest itself in any medium. I like to work in different media on the same subject, as each medium has its own perspective on an object or idea. My latest works are actually based on a few quotations from Kubin's novel *Die Andere Seite* (The Other Side). To me it is more fascinating to draw an "idea", than a flower.

Thomas: Throughout the novel, the dreamland is being described as dark and gloomy and its inhabitants never see the sunlight until the very last chapter, in which their homeland and the walls that surround it are falling to pieces. Did you feel that etchings were the perfect medium to work in, in order to portray this dark atmosphere?

Michael: Of course dark motives have a very long tradition in graphic art, even more so, than in painting for example. But for these works, I chose the technique of etching for a more conceptual reason. "Perle," Pateras kingdom, set somewhere in the hinterland of China, is built of old houses, that were selected with "great taste" and that were brought there from the old world, just like every single other item in the dreamland, like a spoon or a clock or even the inhabitants. So I understood this place as a collage. I started to research in old books, on the Internet, etc., in order to create small plates containing scenes I associated with the novel. Then I printed nine big plates over the small plates – the interior scenes. The work was an experiment that aimed at creating a place, just like Patera did: By collecting cursed details and rearranging them in a microcosm.

Thomas: Patera, the god-like figure in Kubin's novel, changes his surroundings, the dreamland and its capital "Perle", and even his own physical appearance as he pleases. Do you think that an artist, too, has to be an almighty creator, a "Demiurge" as it is called in the novel?

Michael: Etching contains many spontaneous elements and its creative process is a struggle between chaotic self-dynamics and the artists controlling intervention. But I don't believe in autonomy of decision. Nevertheless, the idea of the artist as a "Demiurge" has been an important aspect of my works for the last couple of years. For example, in my piece "Germania I / II", in which I moved Hitler's and Speer's Utopia of Berlin into a natural environment. I think Houellebecq has illustrated this idea fantastically in his text about Lovecraft, as well as in a character –an artist- in *Die Möglichkeit Einer Insel* (The Possibility of an Island). And –speaking of demiurgic artists- one should not forget about Henry Darger.

Thomas: Darger created his own universe because he was unable to deal with reality in its full extent, Kubin wrote his novel because he was facing an artistic crisis and Patera assembled his dreamland simply because he could. Where do your microcosms have their origins, what forces create them and what rules apply to them?

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Michael: Don't forget about Hitler, whose interest in the Germania design and other gigantomaniacal projects grew with every defeat and may just as well be seen as a withdrawal from reality, whereas Kubin's literary work looks like a self analysis to me, which he carries out by reflecting himself in the different characters, especially in Patera and the protagonist. The motivation for creating my pieces is certainly strongly connected to a romantic denial of reality and a retreat into a hermetic construction. The only rules or decisions I make are more on a conceptual level. The selection of motives is only partially under my control and the formal development is to be guided by only one mechanism: "Das Prinzip der inneren Notwendigkeit" (The principle of inner necessity), to maybe intentionally misunderstand Kandinsky.

Thomas: One can argue, that the access to purely visual art forms is, at first, much easier than the access to literature, because they don't have to deal with language barriers. Now one could furthermore argue, that the access to video-based art is even easier than to "traditional" visual art, because modern western man is in touch with the medium at pretty much all times. For this years edition of Art Basel you created an animated movie, that goes by the same title as your last solo-exhibition and that features scenes from your Kubin-influenced etchings. How did it feel for you to combine the ancient art form of etching with the relatively young medium of animation?

Michael: I started doing video art a few years ago, because I came to the conclusion that etching is seen as an old fashioned technique -a big mistake, I realize that now-, and I started to feel insecure about my work, myself, etc.. So I wanted to examine the possibilities and the efficiency of an old technique compared to those of a new one. Still it was often confusing, because doing animation takes much more time and it is harder to create spontaneously. Etching is said to be a very elaborate technique, but compared to animation it is like doing a watercolor drawing. It was very hard to combine the chaotic impulses that drives us, when we create art, with the very complex and time wasting animation process. And being surrounded by film all the time, one could indeed say, that there is a much stronger tradition in the reception of video art, than in a 500-year-old technique. Men created paintings and sculptures in the Paleolithic. They would have made videos too, if they had had the possibilities. The medium is not important, the idea is.

Thomas: Your impressive solo-exhibition at Aurel Scheibler has had its finissage not too long ago. Where can interested people turn to for more information on your works and what are your plans for the near future?

Michael: At the moment, I'm having a big show in Stuttgart at Galerie Klaus Gerrit Friese, where all of the works mentioned in this interview are being shown. The animated movie *Tales, Lies and Exaggerations* will also be shown at Art Basel/ Art Film on Friday, June 18th. After doing these shows for the last few months, I'll have to return to my studio soon, to develop some new ideas and to choose from a few ideas that I've been thinking about for some time now.

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