Morgaine Schäfer

A Touch of Light

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Interview Patrick Constantin Haas (PCH), Morgaine Schäfer (MS)

PCH: You surprise me again and again. The exhibition here at the gallery is once again completely different from your work that was on view before, and yet they are very clearly related. I would therefore like to begin with a simple question, to get us going: Why did you choose the subject of transparency, and the lightness that comes along with it?

MS: Memories, to me, are light and transparent. They are almost inscrutable, but then at certain moments they are completely clear and available. In much the same way, I see light as something that is very concretely present and gives form and color to objects; but at the same time it also fades everything out and can make objects unrecognizable. Lightness and transparency, in my work, are an opportunity to give a universal form and color to an impression, or to certain feelings, for objects that we can each recall from our own lives.

PCH: To what extent does the curtain, as a theme or an object, figure into your work? We are, after all, accompanied by such a curtain along the entrance area of the gallery. You already chose this way of working back in the exhibition we had together, and it can also be found, though in an abstracted form, in your window piece for the Düsseldorf Photo Weekend.

MS: The curtain is such a multifaceted object: it can protect from light and sight, or one can decidedly push it aside for a view outwards – and to allow a look inside. Curtains naturally play with translucency, opacity, all the way to complete non-transparency. At the exhibition at Bernkastel-Kues, the object had lead the viewer's gaze and had intersected lines of sight. In the long shop-window of Walther König, I had aimed to contrast the variety of books and knowledge with an emotional, personal layer. The selected photographs of slides in the display window, along with the book jackets, the employees and the costumers all together produced a choreography of "Humanity/Memory;" a kind of exemplary representation of general knowledge that emerges from a "Pool of Images." In this exhibition, the curtain responds more concretely to a type of "outer skin." Similarly to a house, which may be conceived as the "outer layer" of the human body—the curtain thus becomes an extension of the body.

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PCH: Your subjects often refer to your own memories, what significance do these memories have for your work? After all, they are on a very personal note, since they stem from your own family's archive.

MS: Memories are very important for personal development, even if they date back to before one's own lifetime. Our memory and our cells preserve not only what we personally go through, but also the experiences of our predecessors. These are often understood as a collective memory, and are just as much a part of us, of our history and our growth, as our own memories are. Our personality is not something that just develops from inside ourselves; we adopt behavioral patterns and rules from our environment, up to a certain point when we start actively deciding which strategies to use in which situations. You are therefore nothing more than the sum of your influences: your DNA, family, friends, etc.

Memories play a very important role here, since they accompany us from the very outset. Even if memories may be personal, they are never completely individual – since whatever you might remember has definitely also happened to someone else, at least in a similar way. My idea of creating a collective visual memory plays precisely with such memories, which makes memories a highly significant material for me. They constitute the starting point for many of my works. So in my choice of subjects, I try to make ubiquitous statements that are universally recognizable.

PCH: You create an exciting balance between image, text and presentation, but one that is often quite fragile. Is there any one aspect that is most important to you?

MS: I always try to give the image itself the most prominent position. After all, I do primarily produce images, even if they don't always take the classical form of a two-dimensional surface.

PCH: Nonetheless, your work often enters the space, what does leaving the world of the X-Y axes mean to you?

MS: In terms of "entering the exhibition space," I attempt to create a spatial narrative and thus also produce cross-references between my objects. Besides, I have to admit, I simply like to give the viewer the opportunity to experience the images spiritually as well as corporally.

PCH: One topic that you introduce again and again is the "image-within-an-image." What is the importance of this process for you?

MS: To me the "image-within-an-image" is comparable to a collage. It gives me the freedom to merge various sources and temporalities into one image. It is similar to my spatial work; it's about expanding the image, opening it up and providing it with a greater sense of liberty.

PCH: Your photographs always present documented history, in the form of personal projection slides or objects, contained in a subjectively "matter-of-fact" picture. How did you arrive at this unusual combination?

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MS: I was inspired by a portrait of the royal family I saw in Krakow, at the royal castle at the Wawel complex. This portrait made me reconsider the "image-within-an-image" technique from a new perspective. Henri Gascar's painting at the Wawel portrays the royal family, even though the King (Jan III. Sobieski) was living in Vienna during that time, and was conspicuous in his absence. Gascar records this state of affairs by using an "image-within-an-image"; he positioned the royal family around an oval portrait of the king, so that the composition elevates the symbolic importance of the portrait even more than it already was.

That's in terms of inspiration; what's just as important for me, however, is that I am able to connect different temporal layers to each other within one image. This is perhaps best compared to a footnote in a text, and enables me to experiment with evoking impressions from our collective memory. This is why I try to maintain a certain matter-of-factness in my works, so that they may be detached from my own person. They should be perceived as placeholders, so that viewers can identify with the people/objects on view. Ideally, they will begin to reflect on themselves and their own personal histories.

PCH: So to try and summarize and simplify: your work becomes a play on the form of royal portraiture (among others), but attempts to neutralize the form's familial and personal impressions and make it accessible to the average person?

MS: It's definitely a bit more complex than that. The slide from the family archive was the starting point, signifying the personal level. I then searched for a neutralizing layer, in order to break up the intimacy. As a choice between contemporary magazine shoots and historical portraits, I found the family portraits undoubtedly more interesting than the glossy magazine images. Among other reasons, I also didn't want to make any statement about our current moment, but rather address society from a memorial-historical perspective. It also seemed interesting to me to place the slide alongside a more current technical medium. Because of the picture's hyper-real sharpness, the person in it has a false, artificial look, and thus becomes a stand-in for the viewer.

PCH: I have one cheeky question, which I think I already asked you on another occasion, but that might be interesting in this context. Do you sometimes also fabricate your subjects, or do all of the objects we've seen in your work really stem from your "family archive" (the personal slide collection of your father)?

MS: It depends which work we are referring to. I do make some of the photographs myself, which I then continue to use. However, the slides as well as the black-and-white photos/blowups are all footage from my father's photo archive, with no exception.

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