

Beyond the Displays

by Elsa Himmer, Art Historian

Full of curiosity and inquisitiveness, emerging artists are addressing the current social situation by examining the relationship of man to his environment as well as his emotional experiencing of reality. In this process, daily life and popular culture move into focus as well as (art) history and the mystical and occult. These diverse spheres form lively symbioses in works of art. In many cases, it involves personal experiences functioning as stimuli that initiate consideration of social power structures, questions of gender, stereotypes regarding the body and sexuality, capitalism, racism, and nationalism. Artistic anthropology focuses on the individual by placing his act of experiencing in relation to the public as well as the private sphere. An examination of human existence that does not strive toward a specific goal nor try to generalize, to sort and arrange, or measure quantitatively, but rather, is pursued unbiasedly with an inquisitive hope for discoveries.

As digital natives (born after 1985), these artists have grown up with the internet, smartphones and computer games. Digitalization forms an integral component in the socialization of their generation. It is a given that information and images are available from anywhere and everywhere within a matter of seconds. Accordingly, digital natives are equipped with patterns of thought and perception that are adapted to the speed of information flow and

the possibility of permanent multitasking. While the artistic work of the first decade of the 2000s was marked by video art and digital animations – the artistic exploration of technological progress –, the new generation, when it focuses on figurative painting, is harking back to a traditional form of art production in order to grapple with the present time. One could cynically claim that painting owes its renewed popularity to the fact that it is highly marketable and thus involves a phenomenon that is simply a function of the mechanisms of the art market. That may, in fact, be a factor; nevertheless, the works indicate a conscious use of media-specific characteristics that invites a closer consideration of the phenomenon.

Every day we are confronted with such an unceasing succession of images that our receptive attitude reception no longer involves contemplative-critical consideration but much more, a split-second scanning and categorization. In a very short amount of time, we have become accustomed to reducing what we see to a concise message that is as unambiguous as possible and that is immediately replaced by the next visual stimulus. Even though they may be permanently circulating in the internet, the images are fleeting, the motifs often simplistic, and well-suited to rapid consumption, while their information content is, as is more and more often the case, of a questionable nature.¹ Image

1: A trend referring to stock images that are managed and merchandized. Thanks to their randomness and the resultant possibility that they will appear in the most varied of contexts, they can very easily be applied/they can easily be inserted/integrated into the desired interpretation grid and consciously do not offer varying readings or possible interpretations.

2: See Marion Strunk "Was kann die Kunst? Neun ästhetische Strategien", Kunstforum Nr. 253, Köln 2018, S. 62.

production, the altered possibilities regarding distribution and viewing habits have a reciprocal influence on each other. In this context, it has become apparent that, more and more often, an oversimplified categorization and generalization of what we perceive is dominant takes center stage and that this process also extends to our perception of social and political situations and conditions. Painting, on the other hand, lives on image-internal ambiguities (that must be deciphered) of the physical presence formed by being bound to a medium and to a time-intensive process of creation that is always also associated with authorship. At the same time, the medium feeds on a centuries-long tradition, various styles, vocabulary of forms, and interpretations that have again and again been negotiated anew. The generation of young artists is consciously appropriating this legacy and using it as a rich source with which they (continue to) work playfully. A technologically well-versed describing and paraphrasing of art-historical traditions that are supplemented with motifs from popular and daily culture and expanded into a contemporary vocabulary of image. They demand of the viewer a different reception attitude from what s/he is accustomed to in daily life. The medium consciously subverts the temporality of the digital image. On the one hand, since the process of creation requires a significantly longer amount of time in comparison to digital photography. On the

other hand, this deceleration is also transferred to the exhibition space as, unlike on the internet, the image there cannot simply be "swiped" as on a cellphone or tablet. The painting's own presence defies the speed of our (visual) consumption behavior. It creates an aesthetic interruption with which the habits of viewing and interpreting we have adopted in dealing with primarily digital image material are called into question.² The image-internal association networks challenge the known and the habitual. In this way, the viewer sees him-/herself confronted with contradictions and inconsistencies that elude quick generalization and invite us to engage in a thorough examination. Rationalized knowledge is juxtaposed with emotional-intuitive experience – here, art is not only what factually exists on the canvas or on paper, but also especially what the viewer sees for her-/himself in the work.