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The work of René Schoemakers

I have known the work of René Schoemakers for years and I appreciate it for its intensity and aesthetic stringency.

Every painting, every room installation by Schoemakers is a conceptual stimulus that gets in the way of the viewer. As a counter-stand.

Schoemakers' thinking in series produces a total set of very different manifestations, which of course have binding characteristics: If one wanted to talk about "realism" in the face of the artist's works, one would have to state a view that intends to operate in the direction of an art filter in the face of reality.

If it were a matter of "radical realism", one would have to discuss moments of shock that emanate from the subject, not from the design. If we orientate ourselves towards "New Realism", comparisons with photography would come into play. If we consider a reality flooded with images and media as a level of comparison, Schoemakers' images respond by refusing the camera's lens perspective.

The current need for realism is probably a polar phenomenon as a reaction to non-objective painting. But Schoemakers never painted in any other way than conceptually object-related, concrete and contrary to accepted school concepts.

He pursued the replacement of a naive realism by an epistemological constructivism.

That is what makes his persistence and endurance.

The irritating effect of simultaneous oppressive closeness and unbridgeable distance characterises many of Schoemakers' paintings.

In the context of contemporary figurative painting, the works are difficult to classify, as they are simultaneously painterly precise naturalistically, but at the same time conceptually connected with one another.

René Schoemakers works in long projects and series. It is fitting that he considers it the greatest asset of painting to be a "medium of distance and distancing".

René Schoemakers arranges the components of his work clearly and analytically. This does not necessarily mean that the sense and purpose of this process is obvious. Confusingly multi-part arrangements, commentaries, sharp cuts, scenes that resemble more experimental arrangements than "situations" determine the coordinates of his artistic practice. With the sensual powers of persuasion of his painting, he leads the viewer onto emotional ice surfaces.

"The ironist" Schoemakers refuses to decipher the world, instead he tests out what works; what he gets away with, what seemingly raw detour might lead to an elegant painterly somersault after all.

But if everything is and remains so terribly uncertain, one thing is certain about Schoemakers: the high quality of his painting.

If darkness had a tone of voice, it would be well audible in front of René Schoemakers' paintings. Precisely black-painted, a sense of crisis expresses itself, which is very contemporary, almost blatantly up-to-date and challenges us with sometimes vicious metaphors.

Christoph Tannert
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Über die Arbeiten von René Schoemakers

Das Werk von René Schoemakers ist mir seit Jahren bekannt und ich schätze es aufgrund seiner Intensität und ästhetischen Stringenz.

Jedes Bild, jede Raum-Installation von Schoemakers ist eine konzeptionelle Reizfläche, die sich den Betrachtern in den Weg stellt. Als ein Gegen-Stand.

Schoemakers Denken in Serien bringt eine Gesamtmenge von höchst unterschiedlichen Manifestationsformen hervor, die freilich verbindliche Merkmale haben: Wollte man angesichts der Werke des Künstlers über „Realismus“, sprechen, wäre eine Auffassung zu konstatieren, die in Richtung eines Kunstfilters vor der Realität zu operieren gedenkt.

Ginge es um „radikalen Realismus“, wäre über Schock-Momente zu diskutieren, die vom Thema, nicht von der Gestaltung ausgehen. Orientieren wir auf „Neuen Realismus“, kämen Vergleiche mit der Fotografie ins Spiel. Ziehen wir die bild- und medienüberflutete Realität als Vergleichsebene in Betracht, antworten die Bilder von Schoemakers mit Verweigerungen der Linsenperspektive der Kamera.

Das augenblickliche Bedürfnis nach Realismus ist vermutlich eine polare Erscheinung als Reaktion auf die gegenstandslose Malerei. Aber Schoemakers hat nie anders gemalt als konzeptionell gegenstandsbezogen, konkret und konträr zu den Schulbegriffen.

Er betreibt die Ablösung eines naiven Realismus durch einen erkenntnistheoretischen Konstruktivismus.

Das macht seine Standfestigkeit aus.

Der irritierende Effekt von gleichzeitiger bedrängender Nähe und unüberbrückbarer Distanz prägt viele von Schoemakers Gemälden.

Im Kontext der figurativen Malerei der Gegenwart sind die Arbeiten nur schwer einzuordnen, da sie gleichzeitig malerisch präzise naturalistisch verfahren, gleichzeitig jedoch konzeptuell miteinander verbunden sind.

René Schoemakers arbeitet in lang angelegten Projekten und Serien. Dazu passt, dass er es für den größten Vorzug der Malerei hält, ein "Medium der Distanz und Distanzierung" zu sein.

Die Komponenten seiner Arbeit arrangiert René Schoemakers klar und analytisch. Das bedeutet nicht unbedingt, dass Sinn und Zweck dieses Verfahrens offenkundig vor Augen träten. Verwirrend mehrteilige Anordnungen, Kommentare, scharfe Schnitte, Szenen, die eher Versuchsanordnungen denn "Situationen" gleichen, bestimmen die Koordinaten seiner künstlerischen Praxis. Mit dem sinnlichen Überredungspotenzial seiner Malerei führt er die Betrachter auf emotionale Eisflächen.

„Der Ironiker“ Schoemakers lehnt es ab, die Welt zu entschlüsseln, stattdessen testet er an uns aus, was geht; womit er durchkommt, welcher scheinbar rohe Schlenker vielleicht doch noch zu einem eleganten malerischen Salto führt.

Wenn aber alles so schrecklich unsicher ist und bleibt, so ist doch eines bei Schoemakers sicher: die hohe Qualität der Malerei.

Wenn die Dunkelheit einen Tonfall hätte, vor den Bildern von René Schoemakers wäre er gut zu hören. Präzise schwarzmalersisch äußert sich ein Krisengefühl, das sehr heutig, geradezu unverhohlen aktuell ist und uns herausfordert mit zuweilen bösen Metaphern.

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The Missing Kink

René Schoemakers' most recent paintings reveal an unforeseen perspective on both the artist's self-image and on the themes embedded in the canvas. Look at the pale king (2013), a cross between a Richard III who is anxious about his role and a bespectacled art-lecher. 'I limbo my way under all taboo barriers in a harmless dance of provocation,' Schoemakers confesses resolutely. 'For me as an artist, of course, provocation is not a proper category. I make paintings. While I'm in the midst of doing so, what viewers think of them naturally doesn't interest me in the slightest.' (1)

It may very well be that Schoemakers would be more readily accepted if he were more presentable in polite society, if he stuck to all the aesthetic codes cultivated in the mainstream art market, and if he stood up to those who are tortured by a frantic urge to spend with due civility.

But to take a stance – within limits – this is alien to his nature. He has his own style of fighting, which is always first and foremost about issues specific to painting and about how the painter can deal with these. Viewed superficially, everything looks coolly calculated, well-balanced and accomplished with dignity. The climate of the artistic neighbourhood is right. The venues are familiar. In most cases, you even get family members popping up in Schoemakers' paintings. The collection of previously created works, proffered in several well-illustrated catalogues, forms a concrete framework around which the artist can let his thoughts and visual imagination orbit. Things have rounded out somewhat. By now, paintings have been created which reconcile the visual-philosophical requirements of the artist and the language in which they are condensed in a matter-of-course manner. One need not on this account immediately saddle him with the pompous description of 'painting scholar', however (2).

What is not obvious at the outset, but which steals up on the viewer degree by chilly degree, is a feeling beneath the surface of finiteness, coupled with melancholy shades of futility that ground Schoemakers' paintings as a basso continuo.

On this subject, have a look at a – perhaps the – central work of the The Missing Kink(3) series: The Missing Kink: mater astricta (p. 40), which formed the associative point of departure of the series. Here, Schoemakers ties in with the series of mediaeval carved Madonnas in the Museumsberg collection, and replaces the central sculpture of the hall with his work (p. 44). This is actually an absurdity for a contemporary artist, for how is this gulf between the centuries meant to be bridged? And yet, a piece of maximalist painting was created, infernally urgent and masterly in its conception. The emphasis on visual emblematics can be tracked clearly. On the one hand Schoemakers takes up the Madonna motif – mother and child are in the picture. But already in the next step, Schoemakers frees himself from the handed-down collection of shapes and motifs, in order to submit everything to the internal emblematic logic of a new series of works. He is an original inhabitant of the associative, elusive and hard to decipher. The baby Jesus appears in the picture as a wooden figure, his carved head a blazing flame; one notes involuntarily that things won't end well, the artist is no fan of 'enthusiasm'. This flame continues to take on a life of its own within the context of the emblematic independent existence of the series and pops up again in many places, although it was originally borrowed from the radix series.

Mary appears unclothed as a new Eve – this too not without historical grounding – weighing in one hand an apple (a further versatile symbol in the series of works) and in the other a paving stone, which for the sake of something well-intended is flung by many an enthusiast rather than held.

One could fill whole books if one wished to follow the branching, underlying links of this series. And the individual work always remains a lesson in love for the painting expert, for the one who above all also has eyes in his head. Here, *The Missing Kink: gegenfeuer* (p.34), to name just one smaller-format example, is an offbeat accomplishment, a fiery motif, cold as ice. It makes the viewer of the flames shiver with cold. Seeing and remaining silent is appropriate, even if one could speak volumes about the motivic cross-references. Because the author, though an originator of concepts, is also an interpreter offering explanatory models, a performer, a manipulator; to pursue this is a long, burning path.

Here, Schoemakers deals with nothing more nor less than with understood existence, which also encompasses the understood realities of painting. This includes the realisation that every picture contemplated by the viewers will always remain unknown in part to them, no matter how long they try to fathom it. Schoemakers allows his paintings their secrets. Instead of suppressing the ineffable, he lets it in.

Many people call Schoemakers' paintings 'cerebral', though they are just the intelligent expression of contemporaneity. Certainly – a departure from the expressive gesture and a distancing from the 'expanded painting'. With Schoemakers, one notices a calm resistance to the zeitgeist. At present, for me there could be no more-beautiful resting points at which the eye is drawn into the picture and drowns in colour, and thought is set spinning. How intelligent may a painter be? The reply to this question arguably depends to a large extent on one's own staying power.

With *The Missing Kink*, viewers can even treat themselves to a siesta in the heat of the discourse. And then it's on again through the labyrinth of ideas and through the picturesquely delicate, till you're right at the heart of the interaction with the museum collection in the Heinrich-Sauermann Haus.

Several works (pictures, painted books and painted breakfast boards) were smuggled in, incorporated, inserted into a new frame of reference. It is worthwhile to look at this interaction between the works of the collection (in the 'Mediaeval', 'Baroque' and 'Rococo' rooms) (p.70) and Schoemakers' art, tracing the reinterpretation of individual pieces of the collection, just as in the overall view one can all the more clearly recognise Schoemakers' place in the European art tradition.

Schoemakers' pictures have something sinewy and toned about them; with their cool finesse, they evoke a mixture of verism and magic, highlighted with intellectually-based accents which massage the cranium; they amaze with a fresh form of conceptual rounding that is missing from the pictures of so many painters today. Schoemakers instinctively bridles at style-based 'complacency', which he has spotted in the performative expressive and in the so-called 'Leipzig School', as well as in the 'New Abstraction': these approaches were successful when lushness was still a sought-after rarity in German art.

René Schoemakers polarises opinion. Reactions to his art oscillate between astonishment and respect, amazement and head-shaking. His paintings are guaranteed to leave no one untouched. There are scenes that sparkle with irony. Each picture is like a self-attempt which he endeavours to

share with his audience. Here, it is a matter of ideas and form. Compromises are not his thing. He wanders between the worlds. Two hearts beat in his breast: the thought-based is twinned with the concise of form.

Schoemakers established his open-image concept no later than with series such as *radix* and *carne levale*. Here, the original romantic impulse increasingly shifted to the tongue-in-cheek view of a world in which any prank seems to be allowed, provided that it creates visual-art challenges. And just as he went beyond panel painting some time ago – a medium that for him in any case never possessed the ‘closed’ form, and always seemed to demand supplementary parts or further elements – neither does he hesitate to place his paintings without commentary in public spaces, as large-format posters (p. 86) – with the corresponding reactions, proving that his painting has contemporary as well as museum qualities for ‘the public sphere’.

Bribing the viewer with painterly quality and seducing the eye are the mechanisms of a conceptual aspiration in which Schoemakers sees the embodiment of his ideal values, indeed of his morality. Schoemakers carries on this tradition of his by playing with it.

He implements his exhibition concepts in an exciting and entertaining manner, with stunning and paradoxical about-faces, with irreverence towards the stubborn spirit of pure archiving, and with empathy towards the sensuality potential of the museum exhibits.

The zeitgeist is a fortress. Into the vibrating heroes’ choir which the custodians of aesthetic memory cause to swell in their official speeches on how painting is making a comeback, Schoemakers mixes a caustic, shrill and brazen voice that relates how art laughs when the art-market heroes come a cropper. The German arts supplement shies away from controversy. This causes art criticism to suffer, which in turn hampers the discovery of artistic singularity.

Schoemakers paints sure-fire winners for another collection of memories. Brushed against the grain of convention, logocentric, but chock-full of *joie de vivre*; experimentative yet unswervingly caught between two stools. On the one hand, beyond any well-judged topicality, expected criticism or streamlined crypticness, and therefore hardly an open book for pigeonholing curators. On the other hand, veteran painting enthusiasts want feel-good packages with surface relief. Here, Schoemakers’ paintings remain cold and smooth.

Ambitiously, Schoemakers plants his germinating seeds away from well-trodden paths. His painting flies in the face of the mainstream that seeks to define itself as anti-mainstream.

He calls this ‘metavantgarde’ – and naturally, straight away composed a manifesto on the subject, as a broadside against mindless affirmation (p. 88). In it, he states (4):

‘§ 16 in the naturalism of the depiction, the work itself becomes invisible. this is a form of realism, because it is shown through not-showing that reality does not show itself. one can probably point out reality by showing and not-showing.’

‘§ 20 finally it is clear that life and death alone can be the theme of the work.’

Hardly a carefree walk in the park...

This artist fearlessly shows his strong ego. Where others have indulged in classic male group posturing, Schoemakers remains an individual with a strong claim, a satellite on its own orbit, technically resolutely brilliant.

Although some of the paintings look as if they harbour claims of salvation, it is on no account the wish of the artist to repair social problems politically with art. Schoemakers' art does not convey any sort of claim to improving the world, but shows a modern way to revitalise commitment.

For the artist, 'commitment' means to balk at pinning down things, to seek movement, to continue thinking his way through the paintings, to establish assertion and counter-assertion, to think in terms of institutional critique – from the left, but with actual relevance to life, aligned with circumstances in a defining way that remains in touch with reality – i.e. the opposite of salon Bolshevism, beholden to his origins.

With Schoemakers, we are dealing with a synchronous presentation of diverging levels of representation, the essential characteristics of which are image in the image, text in the image, models in the image. All this can be found in the serially arranged works.

Here, naturalism is the medium with which Schoemakers can integrate highly diverse levels of representation as a conceptually thinking artist for whom the individual work only ever achieves importance in context.

Consequently, the exhibition guarantees a high level of complexity. It is the expansion of a realm of experience and action in large and small formats – perceptive, precise and thought-provoking in style, yet technically elaborate in the manner of its application to the canvas (in up to 20 layers).

The works of art we lay eyes on form a knot in which various threads converge, including necessary thinnings and discontinuities, the synchronies of the non-synchronous. Schoemakers promotes coexistence and co-presence of the disparate. Consider, if you will, how the elements and levels overlap in *The Missing Kink: über allen wassern* (p. 55): the entire arrangement is borrowed from the exterior view of Hieronymus Bosch's 'Garden of Earthly Delights' – admittedly only at model scale – which in Bosch's case shows the entire world in the process of creation. With Schoemakers, the theme is cheekily linked back to the Flood and to a small group of stranded 'enlightened' individuals consisting of a punk, a member of the radical left-wing autonomous movement, a Pussy Riot girl and a FEMEN activist, who cluster round a parody of the Kaaba on their desolate isle. What a spectacle! In this Kaaba, two things recur: the black cube shape of the paving stone, but also, concretely, the little wooden house which pops up earlier in *The Missing Kink: gegenfeuer* (p. 34) and itself only references the same houses in the *carne levale* series.

As in a stereoscopic 360-degree view, we are polarised for the sake of an overall view, which is more appropriate for the disparity of the world than strained tunnel vision.

We can, for example, read this concept with the experience of Walter Benjamin's 'Flanerie', or Sergei Eisenstein's aesthetics and montage technique. Each pictorial element opens up a vista into a micro-world, without losing sight of the whole.

Also enclosed in this 'narrative of simultaneity', incidentally, is a permanent mixture of fiction and non-fiction. Schoemakers' family with wife and children are constantly present as models (without things being about them), and are on the other hand transported to supercooled, occasionally

surreal contexts or emblematic proclamations of unnarratability. In this way we experience the limits of the narratable in transition, in confusion, in the constant to-and-fro of that which is played and represented, and naturally also in the dissolution of the connections of the figures in the painting to the life of the artist. And the realisation hits us: the truth is frequently overrated.