

Surreal figuration in contemporary sculpture

Modern visual art has arrived at an interesting point of reflection. Artists are studying art history again. Old styles that have become part of the spectator's collective memory are viewed with fresh eyes. Worn ideas on structure, style, and concept are examined, and the set values of the overall predominant modernism are being reviewed. The entire power of imagination is being redefined by contemporary artists.

This is translated into a visual art that knocks style dogmas frankly and openly replacing them with new images built up in casual, eclectic ways. Romanticism is combined with De Stijl with the greatest ease, minimalism and Pop Art merge, and surrealism and Bauhaus become one.

This attitude is, in essence, still postmodernist, but not in the same way as it was in the Eighties, when 'anything went'. Art was shamelessly borrowed and reproduced. The outward appearance of an object was more important than its content or construction. 'Appropriation' was the norm. This was a logical response to the intense Seventies. The dogmatic formalism of minimalism and conceptual art - and all the exalted ideas that came with it - was contradicted with images that were 'flat', univocal, ordinary, and even vulgar and kitschy. At the same time it was an artistic answer to the hedonic consumerism that boomed in those years.

Today's postmodernism is richer and more intellectual. More postmodernist in the literal sense of the word, as artists are now delving in the humus layers of old movements like archaeologists, in search of their essence. There is no denying or rebelling (like in the Eighties) but rather a huge interest in the way 'isms' were acquired and how they can be translated into a more contemporary language. Sculptor Thomas Rentmeister calls this shopping in a supermarket of the 20th century'.

Marliz Frencken takes an interesting position. Her roots lie in the postmodernism of the Eighties, but both her feet are now firmly planted in today's postmodernism. She started out with hyperrealistic paintings that were characterised by a 'smooth' aesthetic full of harsh and bright colour contrasts. In her recent work, Marliz Frencken still flirts with kitsch and 'low culture', but this time with sculptures that are made with an explosion of colour and form. Figurines are sculpted

loosely from clay, which Frencken subsequently paints and dresses with all sort of materials and objects. She then applies various layers of resin, giving the figurines a transparent, silky skin. This has a surprising effect. The finish gives the heterogeneity of the figures, with their affluent expressiveness, a homogenous, almost monolithic character. Thus, Frencken juggles with figuration and abstraction. The anecdotal fairy-tale figures stand in contrast to the solidity of the work as a whole.

Whereas Rentmeister says he shops in a supermarket of the 20th century, Frencken shops in an entire department store with extra floors for the 18th and 19th centuries. Rococo, Biedermeier, surrealism, pop art, Frencken refers to all of them.

With the Baroque expressiveness of her figures, with her porcelain-like sculptures (which, at first glance, look like ornaments on a bourgeois mantelpiece) with the grotesque, at times absurdist, image combinations in the figures, with her references to popular mass culture, and with the formalistic method of coating the objects.

However, visually, Marliz Frencken takes her art one step further. She photographs her sculptures, edits them digitally and then exhibits them as enormous blow ups. This makes the figures 'flat' again, bringing her back to the 'hard edge' with which she made her debut in the art world. It's a language that goes back to Pop Art and that reflects the superficiality of today's image culture. She experiments with terms as 'high' and 'low' and combines classical beauty with mass culture.

Frencken's work forms part of a recent comeback of surreal figuration in contemporary sculpture, alongside artists like Anne Chu and Kathy Butterly. Chu refers to Africa's totem culture with figures made of wood and stray materials that have a ritualistic nature. Butterly falls back on old figurative Chinese porcelain, but does this in a surreal, pop arty way, creating extraordinary sculptures.

Both artists exhibited at the Carnegie International 2004/2005 in Pittsburgh, which demonstrated how imagination once again rules in contemporary art. It was a breath of fresh air. Finally, instead of trying to support an intellectual speech with conceptual installations analysing the state of society in a detached way, this curator simply wanted to be touched by what she saw. And today's fine art and sculptures, like those by Marliz Frencken, do just that.

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