

Horst Stein: A New Relationship of Value

By

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With the demise of postmodernity, art has been struggling to engage anew with a world in eternal evolution. How does the timelessness of fine art uphold a standard in the age of the Internet where value is perpetually fluctuating?

Horst Stein tackles this challenge head on with a breakthrough series of a dozen works seamlessly integrating photography and painting. Smashing borders in time and space, he mines a process that sends the viewer through the looking glass into the *axis mundi* where a new archetype of holism is born.

How does this Viennese artist achieve such a feat that drives the last nail into the grave of postmodernity? By integrating photography and painting through a personal cosmology that optically weds fiction and reality in order to arrive at a deeper truth.

These three series, serving as separate interlinking leaps of consciousness, are physically jolting. In all of them, a single engaging image sums up the multi-layered process of an authentic energy exchange. This quantum shift takes place on four separate levels: between artist and subject; subject and subject; subject and audience; and finally, artist and audience. With such depth and breath of interaction, a single complex narrative extends infinitely through multiple perspectives. This multiplicity overrides the limitations of ego to become an instantaneous evolving consciousness within a new paradigm of interconnectedness.

As a beginning, Stein achieves in fine art the millennial pursuit of avant-garde performance: solving the problem of the Heisenberg Principle. Like those pioneering choreographers, he does this by placing a figure on a stage dressed in everyday attire. This presence is a stand-in for the artist's ego.

By confronting the ego and its appetite for voyeurism so directly, Stein propels the portrait into new terrain. He offers a formal vision to encompass a paradigm shift in which leaps of consciousness break through physical and emotional barriers into a new paradigm of interconnectedness. Resolving the 20th century problem tying consciousness to the outcome of an artistic experiment, Stein achieves the formal structure by which he could tackle a pressing theme for the 21st century, the restoration of erotic tension into fine art. Reinventing visual art as theater in the tradition of Viennese Action Painting gives Stein free license to explore eroticism at its most primitive levels. The immediate references to Hermann Nitsch are the sexual symbols found in nature. Having his subjects engage directly with libido allows the artist to explore gender roles with a fresh eye. This self-contained experiment takes place on a stage in which male ego is obliterated by multiple perspectives.

With Eros as a connecting theme, the multidisciplinary works engage at the primal level. Centering his focus on his nude subject, the artist immediately throws off the dismissive deconstructionist label, "the male gaze." He liberates himself from this feminist straightjacket while making art exploring the confusion between subject/object and observer/observed in the YouTube era. The solution is simple. He has the digital camera act as the conscious eye aimed straight at the observer, whether it be artist or audience, thereby making his nude subject – and their genitals -- complicit in his personal narrative!

Let's examine how this works. What was once the "male gaze" is now a multiple gaze, a convergence of "I". The subject, viewer and artist all have a literal point of view in these photographs. The formal point of view is that of the impresario who creates a unique composition marrying the "fiction" of painting and "realism" of photography, with real people

as the primary subject of his portraits. Yet, the observer and secondary (painted) subject have their narrative as well. The complicity of the “realist” subject in the personal narrative is made concrete through the camera capturing overt participation in the mounting of the paintings on the makeshift “stage” Stein has set up in the courtyard of his building!

In the five large scale works of “Couple-Self-Made” artist and subject in collusion against the repression of Eros automatically resolve the problem of engaging audiences with fine art in the “do it yourself” age of the Internet. We can’t help but wonder about the nature of the relationships as we gaze at the picture before us with its multiple perspectives banishing the notion of the “male gaze” to the art world dustbin. By capturing his collaborators in the act of turning to the camera, the artist declares “gotcha!” and we too become complicit in his enterprise. We are “had” because he has succeeded in making us wonder about the real life connections at the base of this fictionalized convergence.

This clearly is all in good humor. If we are relieved to complete this narrative of self-exposure, it may be that the imagery causes us to entertain personal notions. Surely the potential of eliciting lovers, friends and even strangers in our own invented narratives is a welcome respite from the spoon fed manufactured couplings in a celebrity-obsessed society driven by a corporate dominated media!

Clearly there is personal narrative contained in everything an artist creates. The Renaissance artists of genius found ways to put personal concerns into their commissions, thereby presenting works that brought mythical themes down to earth. With today’s artist at the mercy of the global marketplace, the challenge is creating personal cosmologies that lead the creator on a holistic path while simultaneously engaging audiences.

The multilayered process contained in the diptych “Couple-Couple” takes place through the use of gender symbols – the rat and the serpent -- and a formal depiction of interior space revealing the process of self-reflection. One half of the diptych, suitably the male, is presented as a mirror with the foreground as the base; the other half contains formal divisions marked by inner mirrors and is framed by a red snaking hose, a symbol of the sexual “black hole,” delivered direct from the birthplace of psychoanalysis. The divided narrative depicts the inner male and inner female, with detached protagonists in work clothes as stand-ins for both artist and viewer. This real-life couple appearing before the artist as he was painting the dual portraits was a synchronistic event revealing the archetypal playing field for his laboratory. By bridging analytical and archetypal psychology, the Viennese artist delivers us to the split between Sigmund Freud and his disciple Carl Jung. Through performances delivering the authenticity of gender into concrete reality, Stein prepares both his formal space and his inner being for the holism of the 21st century, the archetype of the Self.

The series concludes with the five C-prints of “Couple-Gun” depicting the interplay between animus and anima within context of the patriarchy. A gruff middle-aged man aims a bricolage bazooka -- a phallic symbol of male dominance and homemade chauvinism -- before painted narratives of nude couples on a beach. The artist slyly contains the cliché of pornography and violence by obliterating the genitals on his nudes with bullet holes that rip through the canvas. Through multilayered storytelling embracing negative space as a symbol of transparency, the doorway acts as portal and the shifting bazooka as cross pillar to the *axis mundi*, the convergence of heaven and earth existing beyond the looking glass. The easels hold canvases as conscious containers of gender patterns that keep humanity stuck in habitual and defeating patriarchal behavior, thereby preventing the freedom and independence of a new paradigm in which gender is both equal and balanced.

This commanding display of consciousness in the formal context of an unfolding personal cosmology places Stein at the forefront of artists working in figuration today. The authentic resonance of these photographs establishes that art can serve as both vehicle and solution for the chaotic search for truth within the multiple perspectives of a technological global society. For the re-engagement of art and the world, this is a wonderful new relationship of value.