

**Summary of conversation
between Horst Stein and Karen Peters
held on July 17, 2008**

by Karen Peters

A.D. Coleman's catalogue essay written for the last Horst Stein solo exhibition, showing in NYC in spring 2007, touches on the aspect of uncertainty of viewing photography.

Horst Stein photographs 'common people' who pose as models in front of art objects. The Viennese photographer, who is trained as a sculptor, pursues diverse lines of work. Paintings, objets-trouvés and ready-mades function as props in his exploration of the relationship of art object and its viewer on the one hand. On the other hand these artworks are vehicles of the performative in the artist's photographic oeuvre, which, as a whole, can be understood in the context of Viennese Actionism.

Horst Stein's solo show will open at HP Garcia Gallery, NY, USA on September 10, 2008, featuring three recently created large-scale c-print series "Couple-Gun," "Couple-Couple," and "Couple-Self-Made." These series focus on the relationship of painting or painted images and their recipients. The photos depict the artist's neighbors living in the building of his studio and people from the neighborhood, who pose in the courtyard of the building next to his equally large-scale oil on paper paintings. The artist painted those works exclusively for the photo shoot. Despite the fact that the paintings serve only as props for the two seconds of taking the photo, they reveal great meticulousness. One painting may require 100 hours of work. The paintings themselves are not available. They are kept in storage at the artist's studio. The neighbors, modeling in his photos, have little to do with contemporary art in their real lives. In the role of neighbors and models, as well as real recipients, who occasionally visit the artist's studio, they form – what Stein calls – a 'microcosm' in the context of his work. It is critical for the artist that his work is not made at the expense of these people. Stein sustains an ongoing dialogue with his neighbors discussing the motifs of his paintings and the process of reception. Some of his neighbors own smaller works by the artist, which they have hung in their apartments.

The series of the five c-prints "Couple-Gun," (25"x25"), features a man in his fifties. Holding a bricolage-like contraption of a gun, he proudly stands in front of the painting as if it were a hunting trophy. Each painting shows a couple of a nude woman and a man, whose genitals ostensibly have been shot by this neighbor with his gun, leaving physical bullet holes in the paintings. The paintings exude an impressionistic rendering. The painted scenes could have unfolded at nude beaches. They tell subtle stories of typical, every day interactions between women and men as we still experience and, for the most part, accept them today, despite the global debate of feminism and its achievements. These micro-scenes speak about i.e. the man offering help to the woman or the man pointing out things found in the environment and presenting them to her.

Stein's interest lies in critiquing voyeurism. The series of the five c-prints "Couple-Self-Made," (60"x70"), relates pornographic imagery to younger women from the neighborhood. Five large-scale oil on paper paintings each portray a nude woman or a man taking a photo of themselves in a mirror, while their camera is stuck at the place of their genitals. The motifs appear emotionless. The paintings are austere composed with orthogonal orientation. In this series the artist adheres to the ratio 4:1 of women and man represented in pornographic images on the commercial market. As in the other series, the young women from the neighboring district pose next to the paintings in the backyard of the artist's studio building. Wearing prosaic pajamas, they clearly deny playing the role of sexual objects and thus extract themselves from the process of voyeurism. The photographer chooses a long exposure time of 1 ½ seconds, while the models

first look at the painting and then turn their faces into his large analogue camera, leaving a blurry head in the picture.

As with the neighbors of the artist's building, these women from the district have little to do with contemporary art in their lives. All of them were extensively involved in a discussion with the artist about voyeurism and pornography before they felt sure to not become sexual objects. Belonging to a younger generation than the house neighbors, they were able to engage in deeper discussions on the recipient-object relationship. The courtyard of the artist's studio turns into a laboratory for examining how to break away from the track of voyeurism. Due to a recent journey to the US and his stays on Long Island, the Austrian artist developed an interest in the subject of how differently both cultures treat nudity and sexuality. Illegal nudity and babies in swimsuits on beaches catch the eye of a European, especially of someone with German-speaking background. Blinding out of genitals in the US, while the media emphasize the sexual, became the motif in the series "Couple-Self-Made."

Stein's paintings apply means of 'self-aware superficiality,' highlighting the object character of art and helping to define the paintings as props. He formulates an amused critique of art movements created by the art market or established through art history and institutions. His paintings insinuate, for example, styles of Leipziger Schule, Pop Art, surrealism, and impressionism. When shooting the pornographic paintings in his courtyard, Stein positions the lens of his analogue large-format camera at the same height of the painted motif's center -- the camera fixed between the sexual object's legs at the place of their genitals. This optical play of confusion narrows the viewer's vantage point. The position of the painter, the photographer, the model, and the viewer converge formally as well as in the work process of Stein's photography. The seemingly constant switching of roles generates surprising levels of oscillation. Through constructing a relatively simple, but multiplied perspective, these vacillations continue to vibrate.

"Couple-Couple" represents a diptych or a series of two c-prints (40"x50"), each of which depicts a woman or a man posing in front of a painting with a same sex nude. Both paintings display the nudes in a different interior space from the courtyard of the photo shoot. The painting's vocabulary reminds of the Leipziger Schule. The piece "Couple-Couple" intensifies the artist's work principle of switching roles, which he uses in his incessant analysis of the recipient-art object relationship. The format of a diptych is inherent to the theme of this work. In addition to those above-mentioned aspects of voyeurism and art as object and prop, the theme of the heterosexual couple is broken down into levels of the imaginative or projection and the real or the present. Transposing realities remains an ongoing play in Horst Stein's oeuvre.