

Voyeurism: Notes of a conversation between Horst Stein and Karen Dorothee Peters

held on July 17, 2008

by Karen Dorothee Peters © 2008

A.D. Coleman wrote a catalogue essay for Horst Stein's solo exhibition in NYC in spring 2007, touching on the aspect of uncertainty in viewing photography.

Horst Stein photographs 'common people,' his neighbors. They pose as models in front of art objects made by the artist. The scene is staged in their tenement building's courtyard in Vienna. A trained sculptor, the Viennese photographer explores the relationship between art and its viewer. Stein's oil paintings, his objets-trouvés and ready-mades function as props in the photographs. These props also act as agents for the performative in the artist's process of making photos. Stein has created a series of paintings on nudity, which intensifies the relationship between viewer and object. However, it's not provocative nudity alone that may imply the tradition of Viennese Actionism. It's the process in Stein's works. Until the final photo is shot, a long path has been taken, engaging the subjects very personally.

Horst Stein's solo show will open at HP Garcia Gallery in New York on September 10, 2008, featuring three recently created large-scale photographic c-print series "Couple-Gun," "Couple-Couple," and "Couple-Self-Made."

Exclusively for the photo shoot the artist painted large-scale oil on paper paintings. Despite the fact that the paintings serve only as props for the two seconds of the light exposure, they reveal great meticulousness. One painting may require 100 hours of work. The paintings themselves are not available for collectors. They are kept in storage at the artist's studio. Available are only the C-print photos. The acquaintances, 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 he doesn't make art at the expense of his acquaintances. Stein sustains an ongoing dialogue with them, discussing the motifs of his paintings and their 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 unfold at a nude beach while telling subtle stories of traditional interactions between women and men. Despite the global debate on feminism's achievements, we still experience and accept them today, says Stein. These micro-scenes exemplify role plays such as 'a man offers help to a woman' or 'a man points out things found in the environment, presenting them to her. She receives the information passively, as an observer or witness.'

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 female acquaintances 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 1½ second, 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. Stein's interest lies in critiquing voyeurism.

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 in the artist's work. Belonging to a younger generation than the neighbors in the artist's building, 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 U.S. and his trips to 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. The pixilation of human genitals on American TV, while the sexual is ubiquitously being played up, 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 pursuit in Horst Stein's oeuvre.