

Artificial homeland – Cityscapes

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Petra Trenkel constructs urban situations pictorially – either by means of painting or of drawing. The settings chosen appear to be realistic. They sometimes even disclose specific buildings or particular flights of streets (a number of which are located in Berlin). Any naive notion of three-dimensional realism however, intervening like a tinted window-pane between the representation and the viewer, is pushed into the back, made uneasy by the heterogenous choice of perspectives and the sudden lapses into spatial nothingness / voids at the fringes. Thus both buildings and vegetation recede into the distance, being – to employ a metaphor from architecture – cemented on the level of a situational impression. Covered by the incomplete geometries provided by urban planning and communal housing projects these structures remain both visible with a stubborn persistence and detached, whilst we are immobilised outside the picture and left with a considerable sense of uncertainty.

This effect is primarily generated by the very methods of painting itself: a matt finish is bestowed upon architectures and cities interpreted as both cultural achievements and idealised and criticised environments. The artistic form works as a filter of scepticism that confronts us with underground car parks, blocks of flats or public gardens. In Petra Trenkel's pictorial transformation of a functionalism we can observe a troublesome social anonymity by far exceeding its lack of aesthetic profile. Her work thus constructs, fuelled by an as it were passionate detachment, visions of a genuine viability existing beyond the startling absence of any inhabitant. But neither the painful bleakness of architectural details nor the austerity of the recreational grounds – the latter appearing like fishing nets

thrown out but too brittle to keep their prey – does succeed in eradicating this hope.

In these peripheral areas, seemingly leagues away from the historic centres dressed up according to the rules of capitalism, we find the social credibility of the facades gone to pieces and each balcony painted according to the whims of the users; an anarchic vitality has gotten the better of the stylistic dictates. Somewhere else, on the other hand, the renovation of a facade is meant to provide exactly this social unity and coherence of the cityscape. Petra Trenkel records such phenomena, often made visible on the urban surface through the use of paint, by transforming them into her detached prospects. And here she is deploying the very same substance, paint.

Within the discursive framework currently arguing for a new realistic turn in painting I suggest to denominate Petra Trenkel's position as that of a "lean realism", by which I want to characterize two facts of her work: the method [Art] of painting as well as the agreeable sense of sober observation it is grounded in. Petra Trenkel is attentive to all the different details of her prospects avoiding both the pitfalls of an undue sociological scrutiny and an all-too-easy aesthetic judgments. Her analytical perceptiveness finds its congenial artistic method in an overall synthesis. No matter how much familiarity each individual painting may generate in the observer, in the end it proves to be a construction derived from a register of urban everyday prototypes: a curving street borders on a green plot which is taken from somewhere completely different, garages in a back yard, apartment blocks of varying height as found in abundance in lots of German cities. Rarely do we find all the single elements assembled in a way that bears the signature of one particular or "real" place. Rather they are sampled from a model construction kit gathered by the artist through drawings

and photos taken in the course of excursions. Her style of painting, for which she mainly uses canvas without fabric, does without any of the staple ploys from the trick bag of realism such as prominent hard shadows or the identity of lighting and pictorial light [Bildlicht]. Petra Trenkel's mode of abstraction – comprising the planes of colouring as well as the choice of perspectives – repeats on the technical level the constructive attitude we have observed in the way she selects her motifs. The wry glazing technique does without grand gestures and acts with objectivity and precision.

However, what appears to be firmly rooted in the traditions of the “Neue Sachlichkeit” and the precisionism of US-american descent, soon proves to be a trap. For these recesses – a block of flats, a stadium or a bungalow in a seaside resort – remain stubbornly silent. They offer no glimpse whatsoever into the human realities inside the spaces of which we see the outer shells. We are faced with persistent refusal: Those doors will forever remain closed, the curtains drawn and the windowpanes keep their opaqueness. Leisure time, privacy, intimacy are not interpreted as the reverses of the contemporary ideology of transparency. Existing as permanent targets for voyeuristic curiosity it is only consequent to seal off all those values of introspection underneath the facades, the mortar and the communal lawns.

Petra Trenkel confronts those who behold her work with incisions into the urban fabric devoid of any figure allowing for identification as well as any other sign teasing us to partake in an imaginary exploration. This clash – hardly based upon intuition – turns the observer's critical faculties into a free floating attentiveness for something which turns into something particular in front of his or her very eyes. For it is not political indifference but the practice of painting that motivates the

wasteland and the crumbling facades and brings to the picture's surface their potential as recesses for different practices. Now the cold-blooded modern gaze, able to focus urban planning and communal architecture in one and the same perspective, can be subjectively scattered and be transformed into perceiving a cityscape that can encompass connotations of romanticism. Even the monotonous street, in the shape of its aesthetic representation, the monochrome ribbon, is now capable of integration. Home, currently serving as a problematic counter-concept to that of globality, seems not too far away. To be sure, not in terms of a specific or even an individual place, but as something receiving its tinge from the melancholy of a withering stylistic elegance.