

Katharina Ziemke



ZÜRCHER STUDIO

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The Thicket

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The Thicket

From Glaze to Gaze: The Uncanny World of Katharina Ziemke

by Dr. Christian Weikop

IT would be no exaggeration to assert that Katharina Ziemke is quite simply one of the most talented young artists working in Berlin today, and I had the good fortune to interview the artist in her Charlottenburg studio in the summer of 2009. I had seen reproductions of her paintings before this visit and initially assumed (quite wrongly as it turns out) that she had some connection to the art academies of Leipzig and Dresden, and to that crop of artists who were mostly born in the late 1960s and early 1970s, whose work the curator and critic Christoph Tannert has defined as constituting a ‘New German Painting’. In fact, the artist is slightly younger than this generation and her work is in many ways more intriguing. Ziemke was born in 1979 in Kiel, has spent a considerable period of time in Paris, and now lives and works in West Berlin. She was not trained in East Germany as I first imagined and so I had to question what might have led me to this false assumption. Perhaps I had been conditioned into thinking that there was some connection to this group by her painting *Ruin*¹ (2007) (see appendix), which appears on the jacket cover of the catalogue to her earlier solo exhibi-

tion in Paris, entitled *Solferino*. It may sound odd, but the ‘ruin’ of this painting reminded me both of a gingerbread house and that red-bricked Baumwollspinnerei in Leipzig, once a dilapidated old cotton mill that now famously houses many artist studios and galleries. Or perhaps it was her impressive technical virtuosity and imaginative handling of paint that is said to be the hallmark of the Neue Leipzig Schule, or possibly that her work has some of that Saxon melancholic quietude and bizarreness that characterises the canvases of Neo Rauch, the successful leader of this ‘new school’, as well as others such as Tim Eitel and Martin Eder.

It is more likely, however, that I was struck by Ziemke’s extraordinary painted figures on canvas that recall the kitschy porcelain statuettes from Saxony (Meissen) that have provided the artist with an unusual source of inspiration. The enamel / glaze-effects of her painted surfaces are truly compelling and her stunning technique unifies a body of work that engages with quite diverse subject matter. This short essay will address both new artworks that now feature in this current New York exhibition at

the Zürcher Studio, as well as some of her older paintings, in order to build a more accurate account of her stylistic uniqueness.

In the studio, I discussed some of the artists that feature in Tannert’s book *New German Painting* (2006) with Ziemke. She told me that she admired many of the earlier works of Rauch and Eder, and there is certainly a toy-like plasticity about Rauch’s painted figures that to an extent visually chimes with her own canvases, although his quirky brand of East German surrealism is quite different to her approach. She is also interested in the banal kitsch quality of Eder’s work, typified by those saccharine images of giant fluffy kittens and female nudes with grotesquely misplaced limbs, which he has described as ‘cute, but a bit brutal’. Ziemke’s distinctive ceramic-surface technique gives rise to her own particular mode of kitsch uncanniness, and her work can on occasion also be ‘brutal’.

To represent a porcelain figurine in an oil canvas is quite a different proposition to representing human forms in canvas as if they were porcelain figurines. Ziemke does the latter and the effect is astonishing. It could be argued that her work forms part of an alternative and unacknowledged tradition of uncanny figurative art, a tradition which would begin with Cra-

nach and incorporate such modern and contemporary artists as Balthus, Hans Bellmer, Cindy Sherman, John Currin, and the aforementioned Martin Eder; although perhaps Ziemke’s representations of females are not provocatively sexualised in the way that links these other artists.

We can begin an analysis of her technique by mentioning that the artist actually works from black and white photographs that she sources from various archives. She uses black and white rather than colour images because she does not want her transformative artistic vision to be in any way pre-determined. Her eye for the bizarre and her glossy application of artificial colours in the development of seemingly ‘ceramicized’ surfaces can displace our sense of reality. Her paintings de-familiarise both animate and inanimate objects. In Ziemke’s parallel universe, something organic that ought to be vaporous, viscous, ruffled or flowing, is depicted as solid and glazed. This is one key source of the uncanniness of her art – the subversion of the material world.

We can see this process in recent paintings such as *Hawaiian Landscape* (2009), a work in which the artist appears to have captured or frieze-framed an eruptive moment of volcanic activity – a fiery fountain of lava. The explosive lava is not represented naturalistically but has a glossy garnet hue and is set against a mauve sky. The

expelled molten does not look like viscous matter, but shiny smashed porcelain fragments.

'Uncanniness' does seem to be the best term to encapsulate the sense of phenomenological disorientation brought about by gazing at Ziemke's paintings. In his famous essay of 1919, Sigmund Freud defined the uncanny as that instance where something can be familiar, yet foreign at the same time, resulting in a feeling of it being uncomfortably strange. And before Freud, it was Ernst Jentsch who suggested in his *On the Psychology of the Uncanny* (1909) that it was a state where one 'doubts whether an apparently animate being is really alive; or conversely, whether a lifeless object might be, in fact, animate'.

A good example of this in Ziemke's oeuvre is *White Dog*² (2007). At first glance we are unsure whether the represented animal is living or dead. The poorly emaciated creature solicits our gaze, but only a second later do we notice that the dog's throat appears to be missing, ripped out by a butcher's knife. Ziemke's ornamental glazing effect does not make this immediately apparent and our eyes can ostensibly 'gloss' over the gore, our cognitive faculties are momentarily suspended.

Both Jentsch and Freud developed their theories of the uncanny in response

to E.T.A. Hoffmann's psychodrama *The Sandman* (1816). In this gothic story, the protagonist Nathanael recalls his childhood terror of the legendary Sandman, who it was said would steal the eyes of children who would not go to bed and feed them to his own children who lived in the moon. In Hoffmann's tale, Nathaniel associates the Sandman with the man (Coppellius) who kills his father in an alchemical experiment. Later in the story Nathaniel becomes enamored by the beautiful Olimpia, the 'daughter' of his physics professor Spalanzani, and he becomes fixated on watching her through a telescope that was bought from an obnoxious salesman Copolla (the double of Coppellius), and whose sales mantra is "pretty eyes, pretty eyes!" Although Olimpia's gaze and motionless stance disconcerts Nathaniel, he does not realize that she is in fact a life-like doll, a mechanical automaton created by Copolla and Spalanzani. He only learns the truth when he goes to visit Olimpia in her room and stumbles across the two men fighting over the lifeless and eyeless body of the doll. Nathaniel is then driven to madness when he discovers Olimpia's eyes lying on the ground.

In his analysis of *The Sandman* Freud would take issue with Jentsch that the doll was the primary element in the generation of uncanniness. Instead, Freud draws on

a different aspect of the narrative, namely, "the idea of being robbed of one's eyes," as the "more striking instance of uncanniness" in the tale.

There is a gothic aspect to Ziemke's work and she certainly seems fascinated by the uncanny potential of dolls and doubling. Moreover, like Hoffmann, she also has a tendency to 'rob' her subjects of eyes.

There is often a brooding malevolence about works such as *Twins*³ (2004), *Puppets*⁴ (2007), and *Theatre*⁵ (2008), a malevolence derived precisely from her manipulation of eyes. An early painting *Twins* brings to mind other visual art exponents of this motif such as August Sander, Diane Arbus, and Stanley Kubrick, although Ziemke heightens the weirdness by giving one twin alien green eyes and making the other eyeless. In *Puppets* her enamel-like rendering of a young girl who stares defiantly out at the viewer whilst clasping her puppet in between her fingers is only made stranger by the garish anti-naturalistic candy colour scheme. Both young girl and puppet are like porcelain dolls out of a nightmare.

In one of her latest canvases *Dust* (2009) Ziemke depicts a young toddler who has unnatural glassy blue irises and dayglo pink skin sitting in a dustbowl adorned with unusual trinkets. It is a disarming sight. The subject of a child in a desolate setting can be seen again in another paint-

ing *At Dusk*⁶ (2008), which depicts a young boy walking along a path. This may sound unremarkable, but Ziemke's anti-naturalistic deployment of color, of fiery molten reds and oranges that are used for a backdrop of trees, bushes and grass, gives us a sense of deep foreboding. The painting is vaguely reminiscent of *The Wanderer* (1943), one of the 'apocalyptic pictures' of George Grosz's late oeuvre, but Ziemke's 'ceramicizing' of the young male figure only makes the work more outlandish.

The artist's interest in manipulating the eyes of her subjects can be seen again in *Nobel* (2009). Here the spectator(s) is invited into the scene as if we had been granted the prestigious prize. We are confronted head-on with a group of dignitaries whose style of dress seems to indicate that the source photograph must have been taken in the early twentieth century. The central figure looks a bit like Lenin, but all those represented in the 'welcoming' party have opaque porcelain-like eyes as well as disturbing pink, orange and yellow-hued faces. Furthermore, a blurred male head depicted on the left-hand side of the canvas ruptures our perception of the scene in a manner not dissimilar to the presence of the anamorphic skull in Holbein's *Ambassadors* (1533). This face appears like wicked Punchinello, an out-of-focus beak-nosed individual who disturbs the sinister calm of the proceedings.

Ziemke has been working in earnest as an artist since 2003, but the development of her own artistic vocabulary really advanced from 2005 onwards. A good example is the painting *Solferino*⁷ of 2006, which shows the aftermath of a chaotic battle with wounded, dying or dead soldiers, but represented as if the scene formed part of some huge over-the-top piece of rococo Meissen porcelain. The soldiers are almost toy-like and the undulating hillocks on which they have fallen are ‘ceramicized’ in such an artificial way that the spectator becomes disorientated by the confusing scale of what has been depicted. The soldiers could be giant-sized and sprawled across a mountain range (in the same year she produced a work called *Andes*⁸) or they could be small icing-cake figurines caught in the folds of a duvet. As a point of comparison one thinks of Grayson Perry’s ceramic vases decorated in bright colors that depict subjects at odds with their ornamental appearance, but Ziemke works in oil-on-canvas and as her paint imitates glazed porcelain the overall effect is much stranger.

Of Ziemke’s use of color, Thibaut de Ruyter has written: ‘Sometimes, in the gloss of surfaces, one might believe one is watching sugar melting. And certain colors, due to their artificiality, conjure up food colorings used in cakes, coulis and marzipan.’ And it is true that contemplat-

ing a Ziemke painting can be rather like browsing in a confectioner’s store on a British seaside pier with all those garishly colored sugar mice and sticks of rock (what the Americans would call candy cane) in transparent wrappers, forming a bright and gaudy display. And when such a piece of rock is bitten into and then sucked the colored lettering running throughout the stick smudges the white peppermint interior. This is almost the effect of Ziemke’s paintings *Empress*⁹ (2007) and *Monarchy*¹⁰ (2005). Another way of looking at it might be to imagine white porcelain handled for the first time by a clueless apprentice who is charged with undertaking glazing and enameling, but who ineptly applies color. But Ziemke is certainly not inept, her weirdly applied color is quite intentional, one could say surrealistic, although the artist would not use such a label to describe her own work more generally. Nevertheless, when one sees paintings such as *Mirador*¹¹ (2005) where we are presented with a pristine white watchtower situated in a candy-colored ‘ceramicized’ forest it is hard not to think of the work of Max Ernst, or even the bizarre *Malervald* series of the late great Jörg Immendorf. Equally, the intensely colored painting *Poets*¹² (2005) displaces reality, as it reveals a massacre of five men riddled with bullets in some austere room, but they almost look like boiled sweets and blood emerges from their heads as if it were

magic shell ice cream topping. In another work of this year, *Mirrors*¹³, Ziemke depicts some otherworldly interior space as four men (again looking like misshapen boiled candy) sit around a mirrored coffee table. One of them is clearly smoking a pipe and the smoke is suspended in the air. This is a Magritte-like image in challenging our preconditioned perceptions as the smoke is motionless and fixed as if it were bone china.

Her recent painting *Reunion* (2009) again has these sweet toffee colors which are deliberately applied inconsistently, with the color used for faces not necessarily matching that used for hands. The subject of the work immediately brings to mind the rural peasants of canvases by Émile Bernard and Paul Gauguin. The fact that the image is actually derived from a black and white photograph showing flesh-and-blood Breton girls in traditional dress is completely disguised by Ziemke’s ‘glazing’ which gives them their stiff figurine appearance; they have metamorphosed into sculpture, a Pygmalion transformation in reverse, and in porcelain rather than the ivory of Ovid’s narrative. Ziemke’s wonderful painting *Awoken (Hugo)* (2009) is more naturalistic in terms of the relaxed pose of the depicted figure at his writing desk, although he too has been ‘ceramicized’ as has everything in his room. The unspecific title adds something else to this

work – are we looking at an image of Victor Hugo or Hugo von Hofmannsthal or another literary personage? We witness a man in his study deep in contemplation and illuminated by some unseen light source. He is surrounded by his books and holding a letter in one hand whilst touching his forehead with the other. There is an enigmatic stillness about the scene that brings to mind the work of Vermeer. There is also a peculiar fairy-tale quality to this painting, and in terms of our spectatorship it gives rise to a feeling of voyeurism as if we were Gulliver staring through the window of a magical porcelain house at some Lilliputian character in a state of repose.

It is just one of many surprises in Ziemke’s world. Her work offers so much; she alters our reality in a way that is utterly beguiling and sometimes unnerving. Like a young boy in his favorite sweetshop, I am tempted to return to her paintings again and again.

Dr Christian Weikop is a Lecturer in Art History at the University of Sussex (UK) and also teaches short courses at the Courtauld Institute, London. He has written widely on modern and contemporary German art and is an expert on the first Expressionist group known as the ‘Brücke’ (Bridge). One of his latest essays, ‘Brücke and Canonical Association’ was published in the catalogue for the important Neue Galerie exhibition: The Birth of Expressionism: Brücke in Dresden and Berlin, 1905-1913. New York (February 26 - June 29 2009).

paintings

Dust
2009
oil on canvas
180 x 130 cm
70,9 x 51,1 in.



Hawaiian Landscape
2009
oil on canvas
180 x 125 cm
70,9 x 49,2 in.





The red carriage
2009
oil on canvas
140 x 170 cm
55,1 x 66,9 in.



Nobel
2009
oil on canvas
110 x 140 cm
43,3 x 55,1 in.

pages 22-23:
The japanese hut
2009
oil on canvas
140 x 200 cm
55,1 x 78,7 in.



Awoken
2009
oil on canvas
80 x 100 cm
31,5 x 39,4 in.



Untitled
2009
oil on canvas
190 x 140 cm
74,8 x 55,1 in.



More
2009
pastel on paper
130 x 96 cm
51,2 x 37,8 in.





Reunion
2009
oil on canvas
80 x 60 cm
31,5 x 23,6 in.

appendix



1



2

1. *Ruin*
2007
oil on canvas
97 x 130 cm
38,2 x 51,2 in.

2. *White Dog*
2007
oil on canvas
30 x 40 cm
11,8 x 15,7 in.



3



5



4

3. *Twins*
2004
oil on canvas
70 x 90 cm
27,6 x 35,4 in.

4. *Puppets*
2007
oil on canvas
50 x 60 cm
19,7 x 23,6 in.

5. *Theatre*
2008
oil on canvas
40 x 30 cm
15,7 x 11,8 in.



6

6. *At dusk*
2008
oil on canvas
145 x 190 cm
57 x 74,8 in.

8. *Andes*
2006
oil on canvas
40 x 50 cm
15,7 x 19,7 in.



8



7

7. *Solferino*
2006
oil on canvas
97 x 130 cm
38,2 x 51,2 in.



10



9

9. *Empress*
2007
oil on canvas
60 x 50 cm
23,6 x 19,7 in.

10. *Monarchy*
2005
oil on canvas
110 x 150 cm
43,3 x 59 in.

11. *Mirador*
2005
oil on canvas
130 x 152 cm
43,3 x 59,8 in.



11



12

12. *Poets*
2005
oil on canvas
110 x 130 cm
43,3 x 51,2 in.

13. *Mirrors*
2005
oil on canvas
90 x 108 cm
35,4 x 42,5 in.



13

Biography

Born in 1979 in Kiel (Germany). Lives and works in Berlin.

1999-2004 DNSAP, Ecole Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts, Paris

1998-1999 Linguistic Studies, Université de la Sorbonne, Paris

Grants

2002 Kungliga Konsthögskola, Stockholm

Solo Exhibitions

2009 *The Thicket*, Zürcher Studio, New York

Catch, Galerie Zürcher, Paris

2008 *Haut-Karabakh*, Musée de l'Abbaye Sainte-Croix, Les Sables d'Olonne

2007 *Solférino*, Galerie Zürcher, Paris

Group Exhibitions

2007 *Wheeeeeel-une jeune scène française*, Printemps de Septembre, Toulouse

New Company, Nosbaum & Reding, Luxembourg

2006 *Étranges fictions*, Schloß Agathenburg

Voir en peinture two, La Générale, Paris

Die Statistenloge / la loge des figurants, Kunstraum B, Kiel

2003 Société Psychanalytique, Paris

2002 Recording work with Clemens Kühn, Academy of music, Düsseldorf

Collections

Fonds national d'art contemporain, France

Musée de l'Abbaye Sainte-Croix, Les Sables d'Olonne

Publications

Haut-Karabakh, May 3 – September 7, 2008 - Musée de l'Abbaye Sainte-Croix, Les Sables d'Olonne, Cahiers de l'Abbaye Sainte-Croix N° 113, 2008. 16 pages. French / German

Solférino, Galerie Zürcher, Paris, May 12 – June 28, 2007. 20 pages. French / English

Wheeeeeel-une jeune scène française, Printemps de Septembre, Toulouse, 2007

Étranges fictions, Schloß Agathenburg, 2006

Reviews

« Katharina Ziemke - Catch », Alexandre Grenier, *Pariscope*, February 18-24 2009

« Le double monde de Katharina Ziemke - une jeune artiste allemande », Bernard Génies, *Le nouvel Observateur*, supplément *TéléObs* -Paris, February 12-18 2009

« Katharina Ziemke », Philippe Dagen, *Le Monde*, February 8-9 2009

« Katharina Ziemke, L'épiderme des choses », Benoît Decron, *Artension* n°42, July-August 2008

« Haut-Karabakh - Katharina Ziemke », Benoît Decron, *Les Sables Magazine*, n°9, June 2008

Radio Broadcast

« Femmes artistes, retour sur la performance du soir à l'Espace Ricard et peinture allemande », Radio France – France Culture – Studio 168, broadcasted by Aude Lavigne and Xavier de la Porte, Monday 17 May 2009

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