

Monika Baer on occupied terrains, states of intoxication, and the spectacle that is painting

In conversation with
Franziska Linhardt

Museum Brandhorst is celebrating its tenth birthday this year under the motto “Forever Young”, a programmatic title that also questions itself. How is painting doing? May it always be young, is it still being treated as it always has been?

When I started studying art in the 1980s, the question for me was how painting could be art at all, or how it could articulate itself beyond painting-specific niches. And that has remained the case. I don't regard myself as a painter per definition, but rather as an artist who works within the field of painting. But, of course, circumstances and conditions have changed since then. Certain issues that were once highly topical are no longer quite so relevant. Now, painting pictures is a perfectly obvious option and no longer seems to be obscured by fun-

damental obstacles. The question “painting, how is that supposed to work?!” seems to have been dealt with – at least for now.

When you started painting in Düsseldorf at that time, the city was considered to be one of the hot-spots of painting, however the scene was heavily dominated by macho approaches. Has anything changed in that regard?

Definitely. Historically – especially in Germany – the art world was primarily male (and white), and anyone who did not fit this category was excluded or “forgotten” in retrospect. This frustrating situation motivated me from the very outset to counteract this dominance with a kind of “Really? Let's see about that!” attitude. This preferential





Monika Baer,
"Untitled" (2007)

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treatment has by no means been fully overcome. And even when the previously privileged now moan about the supposed cudgel of political correctness today, we only need to look at the statistics showing the severely disproportionate share of white, male artists in large collections and important exhibitions. In addition, they receive much higher prices, on average, for their work. And this despite the fact that the focus is now on many more women artists, whose work is taking up and occupying space while addressing this disparity. Good examples of this are Jutta Koether, Jana Euler or Amelie von Wulffen, as well as many other artists whose work certainly also draws from a desire to strike back. That has changed: the confidence to claim and defend certain terrains with painted pictures.

In your series, the canvas becomes a stage for different objects, symbols and painting techniques. Who or what is a prop here, and what is your relationship to the painted motifs?

I decided at an early stage to trust the pictures, or more precisely the pictorial notions, that suggest themselves to me. Then I have to figure out what sort of picture it should be, since groups of works, after all, usually emerge sharing a common pictorial and spatial logic. I could perhaps compare my approach with that of a director, who is not herself active on stage, but instead directs an ensemble to perform the material that is relevant to her. The motifs in my pictures are agents that carry the story, they do not merely represent something, but rather embody it. Each time I must

discern anew which form the pictures will take, as what the things as well as the painting itself will appear. Throughout the various different series, therefore, a circulating vocabulary is constantly developing. The motifs – such as banknotes, bottles, keyholes, spiders' webs, sausage slices, bricks and painterliness itself – step up, hold their pose, and withdraw again into the background. In that respect, every picture is a performance.

Does that mean that color can also be a protagonist in your pictures?

Yes, increasingly, I believe. To me there are my red paintings, the blue paintings, the yellow ones. In the sense that a certain individual color or its pigment takes on a main role, or itself becomes a motif. The Museum Brandhorst displays a painting of mine in which, for the first time, I used a single color that wasn't white as a narrative moment, as a protagonist. Whereas in previous pictures the sky was painted, in other words described, in "Untitled" (2007) it is the unmixed blue pigment itself that is interpreted as the sky, against which dollar bills and street markings appear.

But the money is also an important character here, isn't it? The banknotes on the canvas remind us, incidentally but also outrightly, of the commodified value of art. Painting is particular is imbued with the processes of value creation.

Of course, the motif of money is charged with meaning, but that is also the point. Here the picture is congruent with the currency.

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Phantasmatically I avoid the detour of a painted motif and just make money directly. At the same time, the hundred-dollar bill shows a small landscape – thus a landscape painting is also hidden in the money, in the banknote, in the picture. The third protagonists, beside the blue color and the cash, are the street markings. For years I had tried out whether a picture can provide the material for subsequent future pictures, and whether can I follow through with this process as a principle. That will be why the motif of street markings reoccurs frequently.

For the first time, the Museum Brandhorst is now exhibiting works from your later series "In Pieces" (2013-2015) and "On Hold" (2015), which show various empty alcoholic drinks, or simply a weightless black, an imageless state of intoxication. Post-orgiastic scenes of a celebration – in your pictures, have we come too late to the party?

The paintings share the fact that the party takes place alone, only one figure or face – if at all – turns up. It is not a big orgy, but rather a solitary binge. Here in the sense of intoxication as the intertwining of bliss and destitution. The bottles are painted as realistically in their temptation and glamour, because they represent the one and only true thing.

Intoxication and excess have always been linked with the male artist myth, above all. Is the sketched person with a hat the drunken artist, awakening from his inebriation?

The person with the hat is certainly one of the many possible "I's". Of course, the figure of the bohemian artist with his particular lifestyle is a real cliché bonus here, which I happily exploited. But I was simply also interested in the subject of alcohol dependency. One starting point for the pictures was a drawing by James Ensor entitled "The Artist's Mother in Death" (1915). While in Ensor's case the dead mother is lying in bed in the background whereas the actual focus is on the still life of bottles in the foreground, in my pictures a face is embedded in a charged painterly field with the bottles lying or standing lined up in the foreground. Then, finally, in the picture "In Pieces", it really is over. Only the corks and the phantoms of the bottles remain. The canvas itself has also been cut in two, shortened, and sewn back together. After the excess, therefore, it is now "in pieces".

And what is behind it – pure cynicism or a proper dose of subversive humor?

My pictures are not cynical; however, they are against idealization and sentimentality, and in favor of hysteria and destabilization. It is important to me to work within the boundaries and strict limitations of painting, and to test it each and every time, with each new series. That is the logic that holds together all of my work and all of the pictures, irrespective of how different and contradictory they may appear.



James Ensor,
"The Artist's Mother in Death"
(1915)



Monika Baer In Pieces, 2013–2015

Monika Baer's "In Pieces" is mysterious. Here the artist has pushed everything to the margins. Painted delicately and translucently, half-empty bottles of alcohol, some of them overturned, gather at the bottom of the work. The scene is reminiscent of a just-abandoned stage. The remains suggest a state of intoxication –

a timeless theme in art. One imagines the absent protagonist as a cliché of the tormented artist's soul, soaked in alcohol. Here, Baer not only presents the authority of the expressive – male – painter-ego as a caricature, but also paints the picture of a creative rush that is as sophisticated as it is banal.