

Hofmann Werner, 'Song Hyun-Sook - Breath and brushstrokes. Keynote Address at the Opening of Hyun-Sook Song's Exhibition in the Kunstverein Harburger Bahnhof January 20th, 2006.

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Werner Hofmann

Ladies and Gentlemen, I can only agree with everything that has been said so far. From my own point of view, that is. Let me start with a disclaimer. Since I have known our friend – where is she – there she is – since I've known her work for years I thought I should include the shamanism – which she has portrayed in an interesting film with Jochen Hiltmann, showing her now-European viewpoint – into my remarks. But then I decided not to, and in the course of my address – which will be neither short nor long, we just need to clarify some basic points – you will see that I have good reason. There has been mention of “two cultures”, and this of course justifies and motivates this artist's “double view”(I borrow this expression from Nietzsche). But the most important question to start with is perhaps: What is a picture, an image, a painting? This is not a quiz question for you, ladies and gentlemen, but we feel her work is all about sensory perception manifesting itself in pictorial form, that this is someone who has not just studied here in Hamburg – and Hyun-Sook Song could just as well have studied in Paris or New York – and then fitted herself into the slot of European painting. No, our friend here has added her own voice to that choir. And it is a melodious voice. Which makes this whole exhibition – like her earlier ones – so euphonious, a sheer blessing. And that will be the last of my lyricisms. Let me now explain my thoughts in more sober terms.

The question “What is a painting?” was answered in Europe up into the late 19th century in the manner of Émile Zola: a window onto nature, fashioned by a certain temperament. Well, this window – there may be some people here who recognize these thoughts from my writings and musings – this “finestra aperta” was discovered, or rather discovered for theoretical purposes, by Leon Battista Alberti in one of his writings from the year 1435,

where he defines the painting as a window, as an “open window”. So you see that this laid one of the foundations for our way of painting, which has been saturated over the centuries with realities, with matter, with impressions, until there came a kind of regaining of the senses, of consciousness in the late 19th century, that she (he turns to Hyun-Sook Song) has mastered with ease, seemingly without effort. All of those laborious, strenuous processes of abstraction which Cézanne, for example, needed gradually to distance himself from the material substance provided by the “open window” – she has come to terms with this process, I don’t know how, but in an absolutely wonderful way. We Westerners – artists like Kandinsky for example – gradually came to the realization that a painting is not just a window, a hole in the wall giving all kinds of material, substantial information, but also a plane, a membrane, so to speak, on which painting occurs. And when I look at these paintings here, I find a strange... let’s call it a consensus between the graphic language and the Korean alphabet, the letters. How in a certain respect the subtle, lyrical tectonics of these paintings unfold in opposition to Japanese or Chinese writing. I have just looked at them again together with Hyun-Sook Song. It’s all about simple, formal statements about horizontals and verticals – lots of correspondences. In these paintings the level, the ideal plane is evinced in two ways that make Kandinsky’s grandiose gesture, his moment of conversion obsolete, where he said: I throw all this off, I leave the material world for the spiritual or intellectual one, I leave matter for mind. The mind is present here. It is present in each of the 27, 29, 39 brushstrokes. But this level of the mind, whether it solidifies into a veil or a curtain, always accrues subject matter, things. We don’t find this very occidental dichotomy – we live with it and will have to go on living with it – between abstraction and empathy, between the description of a thing and the abstraction transcending it. No, they are both entwined here, we see a curtain, we see a veil, we guess at a tiger behind them, see two posts with a rat – that painting is not here unfortunately – and everything is in constant exchange. You might be moved to quote Goethe here; and I don’t say this because it is a given to quote Goethe in each and every keynote address, but because that way Goethe’s great way of thinking by seeing is projected onto the field that Hyun-Sook Song is showing

with her art. “Nothing is inside, nothing’s outside/because the inside *is* the outside./So take in without delay/the sacred secret on display.”(Goethe) And that may be the whole point of the exercise, the core level, which is sacred. Everything is painted with a quiet objectivity, an almost ritualized language of the brush that also contains a lot of energy – to use the brush like that, seven strokes side by side, or even twenty. But we are expected to decide, whether we want to see a veil or to see *through* it. Even if we only see the veil, we are never tempted to rip it off as in Schiller’s famous poem of the ‘Veiled Image of Sais’, to see what’s behind, because what’s behind it is before it – the levels fold and unfold into one another.

I’ve talked a little about the history of art, in fact I’ve talked about nothing but art history. But we shouldn’t forget that art historians don’t just measure to see whether this square in Raffael’s painting has the right proportions or what the relative axes in Rubens’ works are and so forth. There is also a school of thought that leads a little further, and that does not only include the conjuring-up of magic as the decisive element, though we need that kind of sensitivity for Hyun-Sook Song’s work. No, there is a sentence – let’s call it a programmatic proposal – by Aby Warburg. I don’t need to tell you that he was from Hamburg, but I tell you nevertheless – I’m not sure if he is appreciated in Hamburg the way he should be. Aby Warburg said: “Basically I want to show with my library (of images) that life itself is a powerful stylistic influence. That life does not reproduce the isms, the realisms and classicisms, but is a power in its own right.” I had a short talk with Hyun-Sook Song before the opening, because it would have been nice if an observation I’ve made concerning the Russian language would also hold true for Korean. But during our brief exchange we didn’t hit on any similarities. So I will have to take my example from Russian, where the artist is called Художник. Life is called Жизнь, and Художник is the writer, but also the painter. So the artist is the one who brings something to life – and it was like that even in ancient Egypt – the artist doesn’t deal in cheap imitations of a woman or a goddess, he creates life. And that reminds me of Gauguin, who – around the turn of the 20th century – committed himself to a project, gave himself a commission to design a House of Joy, the joy of living and loving, with a relief around various walls and so on, in his home in the South Pacific.

I think that may well be the point this exhibition demonstrates so well – not least because these four walls are so well suited for it. What is articulated here is a “Lebensraum”, a living space, and not just a row of paintings like we see them in museum exhibitions everywhere. This living space, which for Gauguin was also a dying place, may be the message at the core of these paintings. The artistic pursuit of perfection seeks to bring forth an “artifact”, as we like to call it, which finally becomes part of a rhythm that simultaneously shows and conceals, opens up and closes.

And now, in closing, may I tell you why I thought that talking about shamanism wouldn't get us very far. Well, the way I see it – though my knowledge of shamanism is clearly limited – in the shamanistic transformation of a person there is a process called segregation, a kind of separation or even dismemberment, which leads into a magical intermediate zone, then a third step which is called allegation, but also – what is it called again? I can't remember – and then the finding of a new identity. You see, this whole process smacks of the European sensibility. It smacks of Cubism, of destruction, *The Cubistic Smashing of Forms*, a book by Grautoff, then the intermediate zone called ambivalence, not to know where you're heading, and then liberation through abstraction. That is our European drama. And in a certain sense we have to thank Alberti for that. But here we find nothing of this tension, of this conflict. So when I look at the time I have for my speech here there's no need to talk about shamanism. There's also no need to talk about some big melting pot of globalization. No: here is an artist who expresses herself with the great and simple dignity of her hand, with her mental – how shall I put it – illumination, which shines out of every painting; and what she has to say renders all our polarities, dichotomies, antagonisms etc. obsolete. She does not need this conceptual baggage that we use to find our way in the world and in the art world. I will say it again: art of this kind is an occurrence that makes our life deeper, wider, perhaps more beautiful, too. At least that's what I think her works aim for.

Thank you.

Translation by Ingo Herzke