A R T   P R O B E

ISSUE   #16   *- Shristi Sainani*

Exhibition : *Portraits*

Artists : *Helene Appel, Janis Avotins, Stephan Balkenhol, Steven Claydon, Martin Creed, Thomas Helbig, Leiko Ikemura, Goshka Macuga, Jan Merta, Thomas Ruff, Thomas Struth, Florian Süssmayr, Thomas Zipp, Alex Katz, Slawomir Elsner, Sophie Reinhold*

Venue : *Galerie Rüdiger Schöttle (Munich, Germany)*
Dates : *4 March – 8 May 2021*

Goshka Macuga, Configuration 19, End of Systems: *Source : Galerie Rüdiger Schöttle*
Ada Lovelace, 2016 (detail)

Portraiture is the oldest art form going back to 5000 years ago, with functional Egyptian works which were produced solely for the purpose of faith to Greek portraiture which stood as an epitome of beauty. Portraits have been more than just documentations of the sitter, but rather reflected power, importance, virtue, beauty, wealth, taste, learning or other qualities of the subject.[1] Unlike other forms of artistic articulation, this form tends to immortalise the subject and the artist. With photography transforming practices over time, for portraits it was said by American photographer, Alfred Stieglitz—

 "Painting portraiture will become obsolete when the time arrives that photographers will have learned something about portraiture in its deeper sense..."

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[1] *Portrait – Art Term | Tate, n.d.*

This exhibition put forth by Galerie Rüdiger Schöttle (Munich, Germany) commemorates the age old art form of portraiture while gathering contemporary creative form of expression. Included in the show are a diverse range of media. One can spot drawings, sculptures and paintings using charcoal, tempera, Wawa wood, colour pencil, glass, encaustic and oil on linen, c-type technology to produce prints, etchings on patinated bronze and so on. Artists included in the show are :

Helene Appel (b. 1976, Germany) focuses on the unassuming materials and sights of daily life—a rumpled blanket, bits of onion on a cutting board, plastic sheeting, knitting—drawing out their delicate, intrinsic beauty in photorealistic paintings that border upon abstraction.[2]

Janis Avotins (b.1981, Latvia) paints photorealistic images, which are sourced from found antique photographs and propaganda posters from the Soviet-era. The artist recreates the aesthetic of these images in his work, considering the faded qualities in relation to mythological remnants.[3]

Stephan Balkenhol (b. 1957, Germany) carves larger-than-life human figures from blocks of wood with traditional tools. The resulting sculptures are brought to life by the work of his chisel, creating gradations of highlights and shadows and lightly painted surfaces.[4]

Steven Claydon (b. 1969, UK) is a sculptor and musician based in London. is concerned with anachronisms, fictional narratives and the 'might have been' of history.[5]

Martin Creed (b. 1968, UK) uses ordinary materials and everyday situations to create multimedia works, rejecting the term 'conceptual' and calls himself an 'expressionist,' referring to his notion that all art stems from feeling.

Thomas Helbig (b.1967, Germany) focus lies in the boundaries between space, movement and ephemeral imagery. Reminiscent of the mythic qualities of Suprematism, his work often incorporates a limited palette, emphasizing the drawn or painted element as an abstracted representation of some unknown familiar. [6]

Leiko Ikemura (b.1951, Japan) is a Japanese-Swiss painter and sculptor. She is best known for her hazy depictions of dreamlike landscapes and disintegrated faces, Ikemura's work strives to put the viewer in a place of uncertainty—where they are not sure what exactly they are looking at, yet still accept it as real.[7]

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[2] Helene Appel - 9 Artworks, Bio & Shows on Artsy, n.d.

[3] Janis Avotins - ARTUNER | Curated Contemporary Art, n.d.

[4] Stephan Balkenhol - 192 Artworks, Bio & Shows on Artsy, n.d.

[5] Zabludowicz Collection, n.d.

[6] Thomas Helbig | Artspace, n.d

[7] Leiko Ikemura | Artnet, n.d.:

Jan Merta (b.1952, Czech Republic) is viewed as a painter transgressing the limits of his time; his paintings are membranes between the volatility, flow, and fleetingness of time and the permanence of objects and phenomena.[8]

Thomas Ruff (b.1958, Germany) is a prominent member of the Düsseldorf School. His broad oeuvre incorporates images of domestic interiors, austere portraits, blurred pornography, photograms, and found JPEGs which intend to spur the imagination rather than capture reality.[9]

Thomas Struth (b.1954, Germany) is best known for his Museum Photographs series, family portraits and black and white photographs of the streets of Düsseldorf and New York taken in the 1970s.

Florian Süssmayr (b.1963, Germany) is known for his moody, photorealist oil paintings of protestors, band posters, and graffitied walls. Süssmayr's work often employs greenish or pallid colors, sometimes appearing entirely monochromatic.[10]

Thomas Zipp (b.1966, Germany) explores humanity's dark side. Referencing art history, scientific discovery, politics, popular culture, literature, and philosophy, Zipp creates an ominous vision of the future.[11]

Alex Katz (b.1927, U.S.A) is a New York School painter puts forth brightly coloured figurative and landscape paintings are rendered in a flat style that takes cues from everyday visual culture like advertising and cinema, in many ways anticipating both the formal and conceptual concerns of Pop Art.

Slawomir Elsner (1976, Poland) meticulously crafts his paintings and drawings from photographs, even reproducing various imperfections such as blurring or the effects of low quality paper. His photorealistic paintings and drawings capture issues of marginalized identities and traumatic contemporary experiences.

Sophie Reinhold (1981, Germany) investigates the status of the individual in contemporary times, arousing in her audience questions and emotions. She uses somber-toned geometric subjects, her intense brushstrokes and daring colour combinations to put emphasis on the process and gesture of painting.

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[8] *JAN MERTA MUZEUM, n.d.:*

[9] *Thomas Ruff | Artnet, n.d.*

[10] *Florian Süssmayr | Artnet, n.d.:*

Favourite pieces from the show *'Portraits'* are:

# 1) **Basic portrait of a very young woman, 2017**
Artist : Sophie Reinhold

Made using triturated marble and oil on canvas, *'Basic portrait of a very young woman'* by Sophie Rienhold measures 77 x 60 cm. While examining the piece of work, the viewer's eye is first drawn to the organic ribbon-like formations that sit flat on the canvas. Next, the eyes of the sitter comes to focus. Gradually one can decipher the young woman's facial features, the nose, mouth, structure of her jaw, can be seen. Apart one can spot scores, intentionally made over the surface. These not only give the artwork an aged characteristic, but also form a halo and head-cover around her face. This head-cover like formation draws the viewer into wondering if the sitter is a nun.

There is something archaic about *'Basic portrait of a very young woman'*. The materiality i.e using the groundings of marble, which was the common material of Greek and Roman sculpture as well as the subject in focus, which hints at the sitter looking like a young prioress, give the work a classical quality. The work is inherently contemporary when it comes to the composition (especially due to the beige strip element of the work) in its entirety but it has the power to transport the viewer into a different epoch, a time much earlier than present day.

2) **Sleep**, **2020**
Artist : Leiko Ikemura
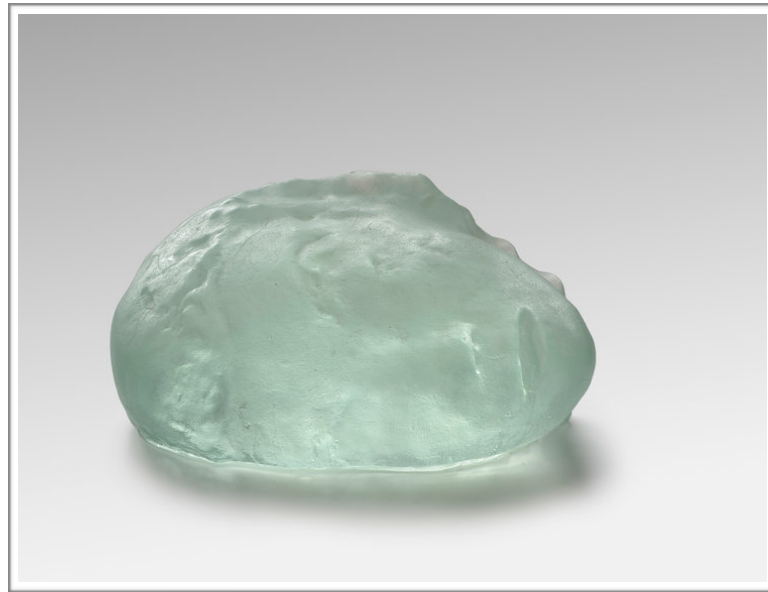
Sleep (2020) was fabricated *Leiko Ikemura* using glass. It measures 15 x 27 x 18 cm which means it is comparatively a small piece of work. Considering the work formally, one recognises that it is a resting head of a female subject. Initially eyes of the viewer are drawn to the lips and chin, this may be due to the clarity in sculpting of the muzzle area. Then, the viewer moves towards the left, slowly recognising the nose, the eye sockets and the hair. The hair are sculpted to look wavy and short in length.

This piece is interesting purely because of the aesthetic quality it carries. Although, this is not to say that the difficulty of producing a piece of work using glass should be overlooked, *Sleep (2020)* makes the list due to its sensitive, muted and gracious quality. In the book *'The Picture of Dorian Gray' Oscar Wilde* suggests — *"every portrait that is painted with feeling is a portrait of the artist, not of the sitter. The sitter is merely the accident, the occasion. It is not he who is revealed by the painter; it is rather the painter who, on the coloured canvas, reveals himself." Sleep (2020)* by *Leiko Ikemura* unquestionably reflects her culture i.e Swiss and Japanese, by modestly exuding sophistication.

3) **Fischfilet, 2020**
Artist : Helene Appel

What does a fish filet have to do with the idea of portraiture, one might ask when Helene Appel's piece, *'Fischfilet (2020)'* makes the cut. This encaustic and oil on linen is extraordinary as a part of Galerie Rüdiger Schöttle's *'Portraits'* exhibition because of its revolutionary qualities of immediately transforming a painting into a piece of conceptual art. *'Fischfilet (2020)'* evokes the representational qualities of the sitter rather than mimicking anatomical structure. The cold, sedentary, raw and gradually decaying portrayal of the subject, in this case fillet, depicts the inner condition of the sitter.

Another feature to commend while discussing this piece of work are its technicalities. Encaustic painting, also known as hot wax painting, involves using heated beeswax to which coloured pigments are added. This is not a methodology one comes across very often while examining mediums in contemporary art. It is an age old technique which dates back to the Greeks (5th century B.C).

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