

*Snow White Sarcophagi ... some observations on the picture boxes of Philipp Fürhofer*

by Susanne Prinz

Viewing the latest works by Philipp Fürhofer necessitates some thoughts on nature and landscape. Today both nature and landscape are, not self-explanatory 'natural' phenomena, but rather ideologically, sociologically, and economically generated products. The concepts of nature and landscape have become fundamentally semiotically overloaded to such an extent that it seems an unbiased approach to the topoi, whether in original or cultivated form, is now utterly impossible.

In the art context, the verdict of anachronistic sentimentality and idyllobsessed escapism, paired with the accusation of pathos, are the primary reasons for timidity in confronting the theme, especially in an image. After all, German painting since Romanticism has been particularly drawn to holding up nature as the mirror of subjective experience, and has privileged the depiction of landscapes as metaphor for sublime engorgements of feeling.

It thus requires a certain courage for Philipp Fürhofer to adopt this theme, which comes to him heavily burdened by art history, and to make it into a central theme of his own work. What may be the most surprising part is that he takes the theme more seriously than it might seem at first glance. After all, nothing seems more different from the classical understanding of nature than his sculptures, plexiglass cubes, light boxes and road movies. Here the art of past centuries is in fact relatively irrelevant in technique and style. Yet for Fürhofer, in contrast to other artists of his generation, a generation for which nature and its imitation are at best used as pastiche, at least the illusion of tradition and meaning remain relevant.

In some of his works, such as 'Black Noise' (2009/10) and also in another fashion in 'Greetings from Bayreuth' (2010), visual elements describable with aesthetic categories coexist in a tense relationship, difficult to comprehend, with other elements that depend for their interpretation on something that can only be created out of the dark brew of our collective memory.

They leave behind the feeling that the entire world, with all of our psychological interdependencies, flows directly into the work's form and style. One is slightly tempted to read Fürhofer's works as pure allegories.

What is the meaning of the flower-patterned armchair? What does Bayreuth stand for in the title of the work? Are the Alpine panoramas archetypes of the original? Personal favorite places? Sites of memory? Yet this hunt for iconographical clues does not get us very far. Nor, after all, is the artist particularly reticent about revealing his sources, which for the foregoing, for

example, would be: junkyards, postcard collections, articles in newspapers and magazines—without thereby relieving the peculiar tension within the works. The tension is in fact heightened, and seduces us ceaselessly into new attempts at interpretation. This fruitful contradiction also characterizes the light box images, which the artist has made for a number of years now. In a kind of mimicry-like doubling, a light box is in itself already an exhibition instrument, situated somewhere between an illuminated glass vitrine and a diorama. The painted picture for which these boxes are first and foremost the medium likewise oscillates constantly between image and surface. Thus the boxes transform into poetic spaces and are at the same time true objects with a subjectivity of their own. The oppositions of hiding and looking through becomes particularly plastic in those pictures that make use of one-way mirror foil. In them, the artist returns paintings to the three Newtonian basic components in the perception of color, namely light, the medium through which light is seen, and the substrate that reflects the light. The results of this analysis of colors' dynamic potential are paintings with the lucid qualities of a church window—with the difference that Fürhofer does not apply the laws of perception to postulate truths, but to proclaim doubts. Diaphany, in other words, without transcendence. Yet despite this the enticements of the image and the hope for transubstantiation. Thought about by way of the paintings, Fürhofer's boxes visualize the fact that painting has become a senseless vice, surrounded by newer methods of image creation and bereft of any claim to a central place in the contemporary canon. At the same time, however, these pictures demonstrate that this antiquated medium has liberated itself from all its ballast and is now entirely free to comment on itself, the world and nothing in particular. Working this way requires an ability for wild thinking. Wild thinking, a concept that has immigrated from ethnology into art, describes an originally ahistorical form of thinking linked to a magical view of the world. It is a non-linear process that occurs in the form of complex images as an integral component of sense perception and imagination. Here order is the result of ever-new combinations and associations, rather than the consequence of abstraction and deduced rational principles such as causality. The question is: How, in times of differentiated possibilities for communication, can unwritten stories be given potency? The need for this seems quite pronounced. So pronounced, in fact, that Ulf Poschardt some time ago asserted the thesis that art is the new dominant medium. Because questions that the

churches once answered are now asked by artists, and in such a way that answering them is fun.

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