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André Butzer: An Enfant Terrible at 50

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They say, "Talking about music is like dancing about architecture." A conversation with André Butzer begs a situational refinement of that aphorism. Talking about painting with the famed Abstract Expressionist is like performing an aria about a stack of Legos. It is, in short, a perfect farce.

The German artist made a name for himself with a series of disturbing cartoonish figures reminiscent of deflated Disney characters. His career progressed from there in halting fits. A series of stark white stripes dashed across black canvases; grey paintings scrawled with Kandinsky-esque colors; crayoned "Madonnas" that wouldn't stand out in a kindergarten art show but for their scale. These works have found their way into some of the most prominent exhibition spaces in the world, from the Saatchi Gallery in London to the Art Institute of Chicago.

But, in discussing his practice, one can't help but feel that Butzer has pulled one over on the establishment. The painter is pointedly unserious about his craft but describes it in extravagant terms. He is, he says, "The painter of a worldwide monarchy." Then, he dismisses his talent as non-existent. His demeanor is that of an unrealized "Seinfeld" caricature of a contemporary artist, a determined golem who tunneled his way out of Larry David's head and magicked himself into human form. In conversation with Richard Pallardy for ODDA, one gets the impression that Butzer can't possibly be serious. Perhaps that's the point.

RICHARD PALLARDY. Tell me about your upbringing. What initially drew you to art?

ANDRÉ BUTZER. My mother was a hairdresser, my father worked at IBM. In my teens, I made the decision to not do the same things and started making music with friends.

R.P. Why did you choose painting as a medium?

A.B. It's the medium I had no talent at all for. Still.

R.P. You are mainly self-taught, having been expelled from art school. What has that process been like for you?

A.B. I was surprised when the art school told me to leave. This is a long time ago now, I think in 1996. I can't really remember. I remember though that it made me very sad at the beginning.

R.P. Tell me about the formation of "Akademie Isotrop." What led you to co-found this group? Why did it dissolve?

A.B. It happened during this exact period. A guy I knew and a few others were inspired to [have] founded that academy and they included me. We had a good time. It had to dissolve four years later. We were young and more exciting adventures appeared on the horizon. I moved to Berlin and met more crazy people.

R.P. You've referred to the figures that populate your work as "Schande-Menschen" and "H-Menschen". Why did you decide on these names? Do they describe different characters or are they interchangeable

A.B. These things also happened a long time ago. It's nothing I think of today as I paint and don't reflect on names and titles anymore. I am a very traditional and conservative painter. I paint for churches and kings. My art is not personal or anything like this. All it is is universal. I am the painter of a grand monarchy. I have to relate to heaven and earth. As half-gods, painters try to keep in touch with the heavenly and send back to Earth a beautiful message.

R.P. Some of these figures resemble distorted versions of cartoons. How did you develop their features? What inspired their creation?

A.B. My original inspiration was Walt Disney who I considered the last monarch on planet earth. His kingdom was my biggest client and I delivered. I did not come up with criticism. All I did was embrace the beauty of his reign. Painting is embracing. The painter and the monarch are on the same level. And the monarch is sending me the gold and the money.

R.P. You've included words, earlier even brand names, in some of your works. How do you select these textual components? How do they relate to the rest of the work?

A.B. I was showing off my dedication. I was dedicating the paint to the monarchs and to the infinite poetry of names and meanings. I have called out the spirits by dedicating and vibrating with the frequencies of light and truth. My writing and painting are religious practices. There is no way around that connection.

R.P. Tell me a little bit about your "grey paintings," which feature spare, graphic lines or shapes against grey backgrounds. They're so restrained compared to your other work. Why?

A.B. All my work is restrained, I think. I am a very minimalist painter. I try to paint as minimally as possible. It's all about balance and the holy spirit. I am a painter of the same. My offering is always small and little.

R.P. How do these relate to your "N-Paintings," which feature irregular white rectangles on black backgrounds? What did you hope to accomplish with the "N-Paintings"?

A.B. They're about the origin of painting. They're about where painting goes to and where painting is always coming from. They are the inner principle. They are the holy graveyard of painting. They are the beginning of painting. They are the negative version. They are birth giving.

R.P. Tell me what made some of your work diverge from the cartoonish figures, for which you are known, toward more linear, almost hieroglyphic shapes, for example?

A.B. All my work is abstract. It's not linear. Nowhere. It's easy to see and understand, if you look at the books. They are all created on the foundations of endless negativity. It doesn't matter what you identify as a motif. The motif is the painting only. The overall motif is rhythm.

R.P. Some of the figures in recent works, such as those at your show at Galerie Max Hetzler in Paris in 2020, seem to have lost the disturbing or melancholic aspect of your earlier ones. And some are in clear focus, almost portrait style, with one figure at the center. How did this shift come about?

A.B. I think you are speaking of the "Holy Mary" pieces? It's easy. This is the classic Madonna. The holy mother. I am painting the same and different again, and all over again.

R.P. In other paintings, these seemingly happy figures cohabit with more monstrous or distorted ones. Does this suggest that their cheerful appearance may be somewhat deceptive?

A.B. This is nothing I ever thought of. Actually, my thinking and seeing are not within these motifs.