

PARADISE BURNS

Interview Pia Gralki & Friederike Jäger
Künstlerhaus Meinersen, 2017
Übersetzung: Juliana González Villamizar

In "Paradise Burns" heaven and hell are allowed to collapse into each other. Paradise, burning into flames, produces free associations, ranging from the drama of Baroque painting, through naked skin, to the aesthetics of a catchy pop song. Which implicit meanings were important for your selection of this title?

With a friend, I first watched RuPaul and then this documentary on the birds of paradise. The wordplay "Paradise Burns" stroke me immediately. It combines the schizophrenia of heaven and hell, my understanding of art, and the idea of a good composition. Oscillating between respect and trivialization, casual brushstrokes versus details, content and nonsense. As long as these extremes dialogue with one another, a story may be told. A paradisiac heaven and a dogmatic hell, or simply, the Wege ins Paradies, and Cranach's antiheros Adam and Eve, inspired me. Also Rubens' Höllensturz, Matthew Herbert, Mariah Carey ...

The title reminds me too of Jennie Livingstone's legendary documentary "Paris is Burning", where she takes a glance at New York's Drag scene. Are you interested in any relationship between this world and your art?

There are some Queens and Kings in my circle of friends. The idealization of Drag and androgyny is also a classical painting motive (Caravaggio - Boy with a Basket of Fruit 1593/94). In this catalogue I connect Rubens's exorbitantly exaggerated poses with Carey's blowing hairstyle ft. RuPaul's gestures. I see this Baroque pop childishly, and try this way to produce enjoyment and to avoid political judgments. I propose a joke about something, but don't make fun about it. My paintings share with Drag many humorous and aesthetic aspects, but it's a world on its own, anyway, and I'm not an expert on that. I'm rather interested in pictorial liberties.

Let's talk concretely about your artistic practice. It involves radical gestures such as cutting into pieces certain works, which you then put together as new collages or installations. This way a certain cycle is created, where the past always feeds into the present. Is this process based on a principle of sustainability, or rather on the need to discard ballast in such a way that the "old" is transformed into the "new"?

Exactly: Variations are interesting, both if it's a sample transformed beyond recognition, or a new, fresh element. A music fragment originates, or decorated wallpaper made up of several irreproducible drawings, and I furnish them with effects. Combining opposites is a basic means to create an exciting visual, acoustic, or praxis-oriented composition. Pure is also an option: pure drawing, pure paintings, pure sounds. What is important is movement and variation. One can stretch, replace, or paint everything - I call that correction. However, whenever an element works, I hope it stays like that. A cycle in the medium is necessary. You can burn paper, or delete music from your hard disk. Elimination methods belong as well in a meaningful process, but one should be careful, otherwise everything would be lost. Composition across time is also important. That which was good should remain good.

But you're right, some things should be discarded, like an old skin, or repeated until they stall, in order to understand them. I actually try not to wander all the time about (vicious) cycles. But one also creates problems in order to show while painting or making music that one has solved them. Cranach is perhaps "old" in the sense of a "back then" that is transferred to the present.

Within this radicalism hides also an unconventional treatment of painting as a form of art, completely according to the dictum "to enter a painting or a picture is to step into it", which has led you to literary convert your paintings into carpets. How, in your opinion, does this frontier crossing change painting as a medium?

Art should dominate, but the format is flexible. If there's space to fill, I'll fill it. Everything can be pictorial, even music. Painting can take any forms, but it can also be just painting. For me, it's about remaining flexible. And of course I also like to pay attention to visuals and to reality as much as to painting, or even to experience them directly. Whenever I paint I'm covered with paint. And yes, it's this limitless projection screen that leads to frontier crossing as a medium itself.

Still, this can work even better on a piece of paper, it should definitely, but in the meantime I would prefer not to think so much about that, otherwise it'll turn into a poodle. And if it doesn't go to waste, then that was the right decision. It will exceed the format, the size will be different. Anyway, I never know what it'll become. If a picture of a happy poodle hangs from the wall, and one listens to a sad or to a too fast song, then a new story results, either a 180 bpm techno-poodle or a sad-poodle.

Also samples and collages of elements seem to be central structural features of your work, both in painting and music. Music pervades your canvasses very concretely in the form of frames composed of parts of a piano. How do you see the interplay between both formats? And when in your opinion do they nourish each other?

Collage belongs to experimental construction. I can't do math or read music, and that's where collage helps extraordinarily. I don't make collages directly, but I'm not afraid of improper displacements. Yes, I work on music and painting at the same time. Those parts come from my old prepared piano, but I could only take some pieces with me. That painting is intended to honor this piano. I spent a nice time with it, an inspiring object, it sounds like a harp, beautiful and weird. Music shows through everything, and it's my personal motor. I can replace coffee with archaic beats.

This interplay is specially noticeable whenever a painting's expression is completely changed by the soundtrack that accompanies it. The title of your currently biggest work "Parade" admits several interpretations, according to whether it's observed while listening to a dynamic soundtrack that works with light disharmonies, or if the mystic, obscure soundtrack influences the encounter with the painting. Are your paintings and your music connected through specific atmospheres?

It's a collage anyway. But the experience is different if you add music. I can include a new layer from a different moment and medium. The work is redefined, and since the music keeps playing as if in a parade, hopefully something similar happens. One spends a couple more seconds in front of the painting because the music progresses differently. I think both painting and music do the job on their own, but the important thing is that one is able to "smirk" in the end, as you say. So both soundtracks expand the painting very well.

Your works have a subtle though quite evident humor. Whether it's the blond lady with the casual smiley-attitude, rainbow prints in her belly top, and heart eyes that look like stickers or pathetic gestures like a mouth about to scream, they all make you smirk quite intuitively. Is humor an artistic matter for you? Or would describe that rather as an ironic comment?

"Wait a minute, this is too deep (too deep)" one can confront every work of art anywhere with this quote from Mariah Carey. Everything in art is already puzzling, but it also demands attention in an exaggerated way. That's what the song "We Belong Together" wants to tell me. My aim is that observers be surprised or pleased, and that they take a few minutes of their time to have that experience.

The scream paintings canalize horror into joy, if it's possible to laugh about that. There's dirt

and humor, but maybe also something like beauty. In music too, anyway. In the album I'm planning, the worlds clash with each other as they do in my paintings and in this catalogue.

Is pop culture in a broad sense a source of creativity for you?

For instance women's image or the colorfulness of this candy world. Everything repeats itself all the time actually, but one puts one's own touch in it. Pop music is that which one has seen and heard a thousand times, and is still good and accessible. If the colors taste good, I take a look at a colorful paradise. Nothing wilts, hair blows in the wind. But then I feel a bit deaf or distrustful. Yes, it is an inspiration for me: But of course you can not trust pop.

In your work lightness and a certain colored lightheartedness contrast with a bittersweet sarcasm of darker undertones. Do these two extreme poles play a role for you?

Yes both poles play a role. The result is a sarcastic lightheartedness. Since my work is specially not that stylish, and doesn't conform to either artistic or advertising ideals, it works quite well in order to approach the beautiful world. I just paint on top of it and it turns real. Or the beat stops and the melody becomes less harmonic. One can call that momentum.