

The Lives Of Others

Kerstin Drechsel in a Conversation with Oliver Koerner von Gustorf

ORDER

Oliver Koerner von Gustorf: *How did you come up with the idea of painting a series of apartments?*

Kerstin Drechsel: Sometime in 1998, I took photos in an apartment that showed exactly this fine line between “messiedom” and disorganization, the way everyone experiences it in their own lives.

What appealed to you about this apartment?

The apartment, especially the bedroom, the bed, was full of various consumer items – toilet paper, face creams, cans, a piggybank from a charity, all kinds of different things. It was a collection of stuff like everyone has, but in abundance. And in the bathroom, you could see how this abundance led to unique solutions for organization: packets of paper tissues had been put in the washbasin, layer upon layer, so that the washbasin was completely unusable. It served as a table, but no longer as a washbasin, since the person who lived there ate there standing up.

Maybe we should point out that you knew the woman who lived there.

Yes, of course. That’s important in all of my work, that there’s always a connection to me, my friends, my family, my private life. I wouldn’t paint the apartments of total strangers.

It demonstrates a certain pride when someone lets you photograph his or her apartment from all angles.

Yes, and I think that’s really great. The man whose apartment *MITTELERDE* is based on showed me a painting that a friend’s grandfather had painted. It’s in the middle of the room, and he presents it as if it were a fetish. It’s not about the fact that the apartment is so full of stuff. It hasn’t been filled with this SF/fantasy paraphernalia on purpose. It’s similar with *RESERVE*: every neighbor who enters

the apartment is shocked, and the woman who lives there says, "They can't handle it so well, but I don't care about furniture. And I want to live this way." That's really a very self-confident attitude.

What is your personal relationship to orderliness and living? Is it a topic that's occupied you for some time?

I think it's fascinating to find the border between what is generally considered completely unacceptable and a certain kind of disorder that I consider normal.

Can you describe this "certain kind of disorder" more closely?

For example, I have a stack of books I'm reading next to the bed, and newspapers pile up. Or there's a desk with manuscripts piled on it. I know exactly where everything is, but someone else would find it totally unorganized. And that's how I experienced this other apartment – there is an organizational system there, but someone from outside would say, that's the apartment of a real "messie."

Your first series of paintings, RESERVE, came out of that in 2001. Can you describe the process?

For a long time, I didn't know what to do with these photos – whether I should use them as a basis for wallpaper or a three-dimensional model. I had already made photo wallpaper with these motifs, which I showed in Mexico City in an exhibition at the Panaderia with the Stadt im Regal artists' group, with whom I work a lot. I also showed it at the Bahnhof Westend in Berlin, where I wallpapered a moveable wall with one of those photos. The wallpaper was printed in a ratio of roughly 1:1, so you really had the feeling of actually being in the room, giving it a very voyeuristic aspect. At the same time, the woman whose apartment it was also appeared in the photo, and somehow I didn't like that. It wasn't that I thought it was denunciatory, but it was wrong. I think it's nicer when a portrait of a person is created without depicting the person him- or herself, so that the world of that person is only revealed gradually, through the items that are in their apartment. I also didn't like that the element of time played no role at all. I thought I could best do justice to this collecting of objects if I did something similar, if I also collected something over a long period of time. That's how I made the decision to collect the pictures I painted of this apartment.

How do you paint? Is there a set procedure?

At some point I started drawing two of the photos showing long shots of the bedroom. I drew them directly onto the canvas in pencil or charcoal and painted them in. Then a sort of guiding principle developed whereby I started drawing on paper first and then projected these drawings onto canvas. It was always important to me that I already altered the photos within these A2-sized drawings, that I became clearer about how the image should be structured. That gives me the basis to concentrate purely on the painting, without worrying or having to think too much about the drawing. I try not to just keep capturing the image – instead, I can be freer with the color. The objects are recognizable, of course. But I no longer have to think about their form. I only have to think about how they're shaped, or if they're painted realistically or two-dimensionally. I think about that during the painting process, but the skeleton already exists.

TIME

With the series RESERVE, you presented the paintings in the exhibition at Laura Mars Grp. and elsewhere leaned against the walls in stacks. How did you come up with that idea?

That's basically the decision I spoke about earlier – not to imitate, but to do something very similar to the woman whose apartment is depicted in *RESERVE*. So I layer and stack things, in front of, behind, or on top of each other. And in this case these are real objects as well as paintings, which creates an additional three-dimensional aspect to the work. In some of the constellations, one can walk through the work, while in others I obstruct windows or clutter up furniture. In that way, it becomes a very spatial work that reacts to the exhibition situation at hand; I sort of wedge *RESERVE* into the rooms. I occupy or besiege the exhibition space, whether it's a white cube or an office building, such as the GEHAG building. The work spreads itself out. And that's what it's really about with this work.

You studied stage design with Achim Freyer.

The stage design course of study included dramaturgy, film, painting, theater, and opera. It was very comprehensive and directing was almost the most important part – the conception for the production of plays or operas.

Did that influence your attitude towards painting? RESERVE is a spatial production in a way.

RESERVE is also a conceptual work that addresses another aspect – time. That is an element that comes from theater, since theater is always a temporal process.

What does that have to do with painting? How is time visible in RESERVE?

Through the accumulation of the paintings. Painting takes time and fills space. By the way, that's why I didn't show the photos – they didn't transport the time aspect enough. Of course, developing photos requires time, as well as choosing specific motifs, but for me, making a painting takes much longer. Especially when I depict so many objects – I sort of layer one object on top of another, and that creates a correlation to the real accumulation of objects. I avoid setting the whole thing like a stage. But you're right – I'm interested in creating space. I always try to create spaces in which one is confronted 1:1 with a scenario, like with *RESERVE*.

What about your current series, MITTELERDE?

The large formats also reflect reality in roughly a 1:1 ratio. But perhaps the new aspect of this series is that I've also drawn details in large formats. This work deals with a single room. It's as if I were standing in the middle of the room and making one full rotation, while zooming in and out, capturing wide shots, mid shots or close-ups.

FILM/ ALCHEMY/ PAINTING

Those are all terms from filmmaking. How has film influenced your point of view?

I am especially influenced by film in regard to the details of my paintings. The term "photograph," literally meaning "drawing with light," is also a very important aspect for me. And I have the feeling that it's more important in this series than in previous ones. It started with *RESERVE*. While laying on the color, I thought of sunglasses, because the woman whose apartment it was had lots of sunglasses with lenses in different colors. I imagined looking at a room through yellow sunglasses or through green ones. As though one were looking at the world through a colored veil. With

MITTELERDE, the veils of color are different, more like melted wine gums. As if ink, coffee, or cocoa powder had been spilled on them. Or like oxidized metal or a watercolor that's submerged in water and dissolves. What I'm describing is all very representational, and doesn't have to be interpreted that way. There is simply a two-dimensional plane of the dispersion of color and within that are the individual objects or pieces of furniture, painted either three- or two-dimensionally.

Can one say that your painting has become more chemical, more alchemical?

"Alchemical" is a good word. That might also have to do with the subject. A world is presented here that's made up of stereotypes from the world of SF/fantasy, an idiosyncratic world that at the same time isn't all that idiosyncratic, since it's based on collective fantasies, as demonstrated by the books on witches' dreams or the devil masks and fighting aliens. All of these motifs are present, and maybe that led me to a more alchemical approach to the painting.

What interests you most about painting?

I'm definitely interested in the process. At the same time, I am a representational painter, although nowadays you can't really speak anymore of representational or non-representational. I want to tell a story or describe conditions.

But abstract painting does that too.

That's true, but I need very concrete, recognizable objects, because I simply think that feeling one's way into another person's life, in a strange apartment, is very exciting. I could also paint abstract pictures. But I need that personal stimulus. I need to be inspired by a person or by the arrangements they create in their apartment in order to paint at all.

When you look at art history, which painter or type of painting has influenced you?

I'm simply a fan of the Old Masters. In addition, during the Renaissance and Baroque period, it was often about rooms that were painted, so there was a spatial reference. It's hard to come up with names just like that, but I immediately have to think of Tintoretto, Tiepolo, Goya, Turner, Friedrich, and Menzel. And of course Velázquez. When you think of how he painted the dress of the Infanta

in a portrait – there's a green background, and the dress is suggested with just a hint of glaze, and the plasticity is created through the white highlight. It's just genius. It's basically been painted abstractly, because it's a string of planes upon which the white highlight is placed in an almost graphic manner. I think it's incredibly modern. As far as the 20th century is concerned, Matisse and Bonnard play a big role for me. I'm not a fan of painting per se. With everything I like, the concept plays a major role for me. I often like works with a spatial reference, such as Jason Rhoades' material battles or the very early installations by Jonathan Meese. Or Sarah Lucas, but there it's especially these textual components that often have to do with sex or gender topics. One painter I admire is Marlene Dumas. I love the combination of extremely sensuous painting that has no prohibitions, that goes to extremes in terms of color and form; that she addresses existential issues and raises questions of aesthetics and anti-aesthetics. When I started university, I was a total fan of the so-called painter princes, not so much Lüpertz, but Baselitz, Albert Oehlen, and Kippenberger – those were my gods back then.

How did you become familiar with their painting?

I saw them in Hamburg's Kunsthalle and in books. Then I lived for a while with Cosima von Bonin, who was going to lectures by Büttner at the time.

What fascinated you so much about a painter like Baselitz?

Today I look at it very differently, but back then I was probably fascinated by the provocation, all of those penis things. I loved the early Baselitz works, before he started painting everything upside-down. But I even liked that. I think I liked those male painters so much because I wanted to do something that went against all that, something that established a female position.

But at the same time, in the 1980s, in precisely this type of painting, there was a certain cynicism. Or to put it more kindly: humor.

Sure. You mean Kippenberger.

Baselitz as well. All of these upside-down images...

But Baselitz also has this heaviness...

That took over at some point. But the early pictures you liked so much have cheeky, provocative gestures, such as the famous masturbation picture, Die grosse Nacht im Eimer (The Big Night Down the Drain). But I don't see this sort of irony or cynicism in your current series.

I'm not interested in irony in connection with these disorder paintings. I'm more interested in creating a sort of lightness. Not the social aspect that one could accentuate in this context of disorganization. It's more about reproducing someone's private world, diving in – or to say it with pathos – entering into the world of another.

Without prejudice, without value judgments.

Yes, just the opposite, with a very precise, analyzing, more loving gaze. On the other hand, you could say that I take advantage of others' private lives – that also has something aggressive or exploitative about it. Yet at the same time, I am present in the picture, even more than the occupants of the rooms I paint. I'm more the one who's shown in the paintings, since everything is so subjective. It's not photographic or photorealistic, but rather painted in a very subjective way. And the dispersion of the colors is an aspect of this very subjective gaze. I often paint these motifs repeatedly, because I'm always trying to get closer to them. And the different colors play a big role in that. Each picture has a different surface.

MAGIC/ PORNOGRAPHY

How did you come up with the idea of creating sculptures for this exhibition?

The whole time, I had the feeling that something was missing from this work. With *RESERVE*, it was clear that a spatial reference would be created through the way the paintings were layered and stacked up. With *UNSER HAUS* it was clear that there should be an organization of the pictures reminiscent of a shelving system. With this work, I noticed that the pictures were pictures and needed some distance from one other, and in order for me to make a spatial work, something was still missing. So I got the idea for a three-dimensional work. Basically, the whole thing requires a

magic center. I say "magic" in quotes because it has to do with these SF/fantasy themes. So it should be a middle around which the pictures are grouped.

Like around a campfire.

Yes, or like a magic ritual with something holy at the center. Cult objects maybe, around which the participants gather in a sort of séance – in this case it's the paintings. I also find it interesting to try to create something museum-like, as if you were showing relics from another world in the natural history museum, which are shown on the one hand in three dimensions, and on the other as illustrations. And, at the same time, a space is created in which one can see both together. I thought about magic rituals and then I found some lead figures from New Year's Eve [It's traditional in Germany on New Year's Eve to heat up pieces of lead and then drop the liquid metal into cold water. The resulting shapes are interpreted as omens for the new year. –trans.]. And I thought: that's it. It's the kind of thing you leave lying around for years, always meaning to throw it away, but you never do. You always associate something with it, even if it's just a silly New Year's Eve ritual. You don't really believe in it, but you can still remember the situation and it retains a certain meaning. At the same time, these figures also have something that lies between abstract and representational. I liked that: an object that isn't clearly defined. The sculptures are reminiscent of these lead figures, but they're something else. They're semi-abstract sculptures.

Is there such a thing as feminine art or feminine painting?

That's a topic for a very long discussion. I think it's more a matter of art that addresses themes specific to women. I dealt with pornography for a long time in my work. Several works have resulted from porn material. I looked in porn magazines and films for motifs and collected a bit. Then I started painting lesbian couples in watercolor. From that resulted a booklet consisting purely of lesbian couples, painted very simply on typing paper in black watercolor. For me, pornography is first of all a male domain per se. I wanted to occupy it completely for myself with things that I liked. I wanted to use that, but also wanted to say something, something different, about it. The watercolors in the booklet *In Wärmeland* are very subjective, as if someone had painted their own porn at home. With the display cases in *Wärmeland*, they're more like film stills.

They were also shown in the exhibition Das achte Feld (The Eighth Square) at Cologne's Museum

Ludwig, and they look a bit like plasticine figures from children's TV shows. They have a pornographic element, but they're funny and innocent at the same time.

Absolutely. As an introduction to the plasticine dolls I used Barbie, Ken, and Big Jim, the figures everyone knows. I then interpreted them differently.

So is what you do a form of appropriation?

Definitely. My work is not pornography, but it addresses the topic in a very particular way. That's also the case with the works about order and disorder. In the series *POSTER_BOX* it's also about appropriating what I encounter. For instance, I was at a lesbian party, took photos, and then painted them. And there are people in them I know and people I don't, but it expresses something about my life. *POSTER_BOX* also features female wrestlers, whom I don't know, of course – they're from a documentary about Japanese martial arts. It showed how hard they train, and I liked that aggressive relationship between two women that's expressed in a fight. I'm interested in transporting a specific subject material. Maybe very laconically, but sometimes with a certain voluptuousness.

Women wrestlers, porn, and people who don't clean up their apartments are often fodder for sensationalistic news stories or infotainment media. There's an entire industry that deals with the same topics as you do.

Yes, I do address the sensationalistic, but I try to deal with it in a different way. This isn't meant to sound moralistic; I'm not interested in sensationalism, but rather in appropriation. There's something very banal in these topics. Even a woman pissing is something very banal and everyday. I'm interested in everyday life. That's also the reason why I wouldn't be satisfied with painting color fields. I need everyday life as a link. At the same time, I don't want to force the viewer into anything. I'd rather create as great an openness as possible, so the viewer can enter into it in some places. That's why I think it's good to depict recognizable things, quotidian, familiar things. That's also why I'm a representational painter.

It's not exactly a great time for representational painting right now. When you look at what's going on now, it has been a stronger presence in the past than now. At the moment there's more of a

discussion about modernism, the 1960s, '70s, Minimalism. If I were to put together an exhibition of current trends, it would be something like a plywood construction with strip lights and reflective foil.

Yes, there are always people who are totally enthusiastic about representationalism – it's really very touching. And there are those who cut it down and describe my paintings as "social kitsch." That was hard in the beginning. In 1997, when I showed *In Wärmeland* for the first time, it totally frustrated me. There were people who thought it was all done really well, right down to the details. Others thought it was precisely that that was so hideous and terrible. I think it had to do with the fact that I didn't make use of this glamour image, this radical chic that they wanted for the topic of porn. It's really interesting to see how people react. I'm anxious to see what happens with this one.

Me too.

Are you scared?

No, not at all.

I'm really happy about it. But I'll warn you – my work divides people.

Well, I'll just scratch out the eyes of anyone who doesn't like it! [laughter]