

## NOTES ON *MITTELERDE*

### Objects in Disarray

*In the Temple of the Rat, The Devil's Tear, Reckoning With Jane Collins, Under the Spell of the Lunar Caustic, The Arctic Sea Witch, Planet of the Magicians, Arconada's Killer Cyclopes, The Death Mask From Atlantis*: these are translations of the titles of German-language horror tales featuring witch-hunter John Sinclair, collected in a volume by author Jason Dark.

The volume is at the front of a pinewood shelf from Ikea; next to it is a forward-facing book whose title *Die Entdeckung von Mittelerte* (*The Discovery of Middle Earth*) can just barely be read. This volume contains esoteric secondary literature on J.R.R. Tolkien's fantasy novel *The Lord of the Rings*. In front of that, along with other bits and pieces in a container, sits an artificial eyeball. What looks like a small leather-bound address book has been placed upon the Jason Dark book; behind it is a pile of magazines. The shelf above contains a human skull accompanied by a smaller, more finely crafted skull – a reproduction of an ape's head – creating a morbid little ensemble of knick-knacks. Next to this is a plant. One sees simply a wilted leaf, a pot, and a white stripe that could be a coaster.

In another painting, additional book titles can be seen behind the artificial eye: *The Black Metal Bible* by Matthias Herr – a reference book for the music genre – and a book with *Heavy Metal* printed on the cover. The formal similarity between the artificial eye and the wreath around the glittering diamond ring on the cover of *Die Entdeckung von Mittelerte*, which resembles a spherical space or a cushion for jewels, is starkly accentuated by the bluish-orange coloration the artist has veiled the overall image in. In yet another painting, the potted plant is more easily discernible, but the skull is somewhat obscured by a devil mask placed on the upper end of the previously mentioned shelf. The shelf is next to a window; in front of the shelf and the window leans a large picture depicting flying creatures, dragons, and dancing figures. It can only be partially seen, obscured as it is by objects such as a frame, an office lamp, a pile of books, and a rattan table. Next to the table we see a floor lamp rising up like a column or rolled-up carpet, and to the

side of that a slender, branched metal candelabrum. The corner of furniture to the left could be a bed or a couch. It serves as a repository for various things such as boxes, articles of clothing, a scarf, a cardboard tube, and records. But these are the contents of yet another painting.

Kerstin Drechsel paints interiors. This is the third series of paintings that reveal her fascination for a critical stage of disorder and abundance. In the series *RESERVE* (2001–2005) it was the home of a woman who hoarded piles of drugstore items and other things in her rooms and spread them around her bathroom; then, in *UNSER HAUS (OUR HOUSE)*, the refuge of two Berlin artsy types whose lifelong relationships with literature, film, and art are manifested in nearly unmanageable layers and piles of books, papers, and video cassettes; now it's the apartment of a young man whose passion for collecting reveals an affinity to music, science fiction, fantasy, and heavy metal.

Orientation proves to be difficult. One needs the analytical skills of a detective to develop a sense of the size and location of the individual areas the artist so assiduously sets out to reproduce. The perspective is a constantly shifting one: a mid shot replaces an aerial view, the camera she uses to photograph the interiors zooms in on other details in the make-up of the rooms.

One wonders how this man lives; how he is able to exist in this apartment. At the same time, Drechsel's paintings produce an immediate shock: that of invading another person's life and privacy. The manner in which the artist approaches these interiors recalls a break-in. She acts as cautiously as a thief, moving forward carefully, feeling her way so as to remain undetected and avoid leaving clues behind, seeking orientation and then discovering worthwhile booty in an unexpected or secret location.

Still, the situation is ambiguous. Seen from another perspective, her pictures function like a precise documentation of what appears to be a rifled apartment in which a break-in has occurred – crime scene photography. What were the thieves looking for? How does the owner respond to the situation? The linking of these two planes of narrative and time establishes the cinematic view that makes Kerstin Drechsel's art so sophisticated.

Drechsel devotes herself to the arrangement at hand with great care. After documenting the object of research – the private homes she photographs – she draws the views she considers most interesting onto a canvas using pencil and ruler. These lines serve as a guide for applying thin paint one would expect more from small-scale watercolor or gouache.

She then paints in the shapes, emphasizes the lines. In some paintings, Drechsel is interested in each individual detail; in others entire areas remain free of color. Her coloring process establishes a parallel to the processes giving rise to the development of the apartment's condition. Drechsel applies color as if she were recreating the genesis of disorderliness in its temporal state of being. The juxtapositions of space and shape echo the coexistence and superimposition, the stacking and piling of the objects that have accumulated in the lives of the resident whose home she is interested in. The transparent glazes and the decision to leave certain areas unpainted accentuate her deconstructivist methods. The pencil drawings are not erased; on the contrary, they are a constituent element of her paintings.

Kerstin Drechsel's manner of constructing images and choice of painting method imitate the parameters that cause an ever-increasing degree of chaos to arise out of order. She registers the way piles collapse, containers overflow, and how surfaces and furniture become overwhelmed due to a lack of storage. She detects once-clear principles of order and visualizes their erosion. To achieve this, she applies color only partially, dissolving the unity of the motif and brightening backgrounds to contrast with sharply contoured pictorial elements – or she omits these elements, leaving them in mere outline form.

By applying veils of color over the images, Drechsel compresses or transfigures the motifs. She heightens the intensity of chaos and disorder, constructing what appear to be emotionally charged states through color. Some areas seem demure, others fluffy; in certain parts the color melts away or collects into resinous blobs. At first glance, she seems to play with the familiar psychological attributes of color. One might interpret a brown picture as depressing, dull, and dusty; a green one might be nostalgic, enchanted, and mysterious; a violet one somnambulant, lost in reverie; complementary colors of red and green might be seen as feverishly hallucinatory. But an interpretation of this kind is illusory.

### **Aesthetics and Morals**

One of the artist's principles in her painting series is to repeatedly sketch the same view or nearly identical details. Since she only applies color to a few of these "copies," a psychological interpretation of the colors used quickly proves to be cliché.

During the painting process, Drechsel chooses her colors according to purely aesthetic considerations. The moods created become flimsy to the same degree as the paintings prove to be transparent. Drechsel deliberately allows the contours of the initial sketch to emerge. Her pictures are transparent in the truest sense of the word. And their strength lies in their ability to make the illusionistic character of painting as obvious as the painterly process they are based on. The artist is particularly interested in the relationship between artist and viewer, the way in which the image is constructed by the viewer's gaze and by the possibilities of manipulating this gaze and directing it to certain details.

There are many motifs in Drechsel's series that defy a foreseeable reaction. Her paintings of the apartments of "messies" might well invite moralizing thought or discriminatory judgment. But the artist is confidently reticent in response to such classifications. She rigorously faces up to the exploitability of her subject, the artistic processing of the intimacy of a person's private space and its presentation to the public.

She is well aware of her ongoing project of expanding cultural discourse and overriding taboos of presentability. This is apparent in her group of sculptural and drawing works titled *In Wärmeland (In Warmthland)* from 1996–98, which deals with the figure of the viewer as voyeur and the male gaze created by the porn industry that characterizes hardcore magazines and films; the work explores the possibilities of an artistic depiction of sexuality that is not discriminatory.

In the series *In Wärmeland*, Drechsel molded and painted adult-only lesbian sex scenes in which plasticine Barbie dolls and painted pin-up girls light-heartedly get it on, presenting a humorous examination of the voyeuristic gaze and the positioning and staging of porn actors resulting from this gaze. In *I'll try to get closer* (2001) and the more recent group of works titled *POSTER\_BOX* (2004), she questions the preoccupation with the privacy and sexuality of women in the art public's eye.

Like the series before it, the series presented here, *MITTELERDE*, also deals with negotiating privacy and the relationship to the people portrayed, whose trust must be maintained; in addition, it addresses the dilemma of developing a non-exploitative interest in the lifestyle of a person who could easily be dismissed as an oddball or a "messie."

The artist does not close herself off to astonishment at the way her subjects live. She traces the intimate facets of a personality whose almost obsessive impulse to collect results in living

conditions that are barely manageable. But the standards of convention and mainstream already take hold here.

Drechsel does not portray horror scenarios, although one could, with a certain pleasure, imagine something of this sort between the covers of the heavy metal books and Jason Dark's witch hunts. Instead, she is interested in showing, in as differentiated a manner as possible, a segment of an idiosyncratically created culture of everyday life; a piece of social reality in its crazy, sometimes suppressed or hidden banality.

The paintings suggest a continual securing of evidence from which one can guess at the various dreams and problems in the life of the inhabitant: his development into a young adult who lives in an apartment that's much too small, with childhood stuffed animals piled on the bed along with synthesizers, boxes, hangers, rugs, and blankets, making it impossible to imagine anyone finding enough room to sleep. Drechsel's paintings make the development of this world legible, as though in layers of sediment. A guitar leaned against a wall, a jacket on a hanger, the easy chair and couch covered with cans and pieces of clothing, the platform bed used as a storage space all bear witness to an eventful life that only partially takes place inside the apartment, a life that does not become more tangible through the inspection of its contents.

### **The Story of the Blind Man**

In Michelangelo Antonioni's film *The Passenger*, the protagonist tells a young woman he happens to meet the story of a blind man whose sight is restored through surgery. He is so overwhelmed by these new impressions that he withdraws into a darkened room and eventually commits suicide.

This tragic image invites comparison with Kerstin Drechsel's often breathtakingly excessive interior views, which shock the viewer in a similar way. She minutely captures this bombardment of the retina in oil paint and graphite on canvas, giving space to the madness of daily life with vehemence and finely tuned observation depicted in airy, streaky layers of color. The varying degrees of distance to the objects as the artist moves through the space with her camera, whether in close-up, overview, or medium shot, allow her to categorize and transfer the disorder onto individual canvases. The unsettling feeling of chaos and concomitant intrusion into another person's privacy slowly give way to interest and curiosity.

It is certainly the nearly cinematic setting in Kerstin Drechsel's work that brings film to mind, specifically Michelangelo Antonioni's famous film. Her survey of an apartment is like the work of a location scout, storyboard drawings that evoke an environment one can imagine a life in.

Antonioni's use of image is similar. His storytelling uses objects and places as well as a movement in space that not only carries the stories in his films forward, but also creates them; characters gain form and depth both through their location in space and through objects. Meaning or a questioning of meaning only occurs through a gauging of the space through which the few main figures in Antonioni's films move.

The wealth of these films results from an analysis of the viewer's gaze; this alone allows for a shift between figure, object, and landscape. It is the gaze of the camera, guided in different ways by the cinematographer and director. The gazes of the figures in the film are observed and reciprocated; the gaze of the viewer combines elements, penetrates them, and sets them in relation to his or her own life. What meaning do pictures have, whether as individual compositions of objects or strung together? What do they say, and what don't they say; what do they conceal? Antonioni depicts the space between people and objects – its emptiness. An emptiness that makes existence possible and palpable, but that also causes the protagonists of the stories to suffer.

Kerstin Drechsel works in a similar way when she leaves areas blank in order to comprehend the space people and their dreams create. She suspends the meaning of this life and stores it in her paintings, without intending to harm or decipher it. She leaves things in their disarray. Her paintings tell of the difficulties of interpersonal relationships and lack of communication; of the search for meaning and of mortality; of existential topics.

At the end of the film, after the main character has told the story about the blind man, an extremely long tracking shot begins, a subjective shot done mechanically, without shakiness or straying. Gently, the gaze of the camera – our gaze – moves through a room to a latticed window and then proceeds through it. There, the view is expanded to a long shot showing a dusty square enclosed by a wall. One sees a child and an old man, then two younger men, one after another. In between, cars pass through the frame. They stop, turn, and drive on. The camera skims a series of stories that remain unrevealed. It moves on, tilts briefly upwards, then turns 180 degrees to point back at the house from which it emerged. Police arrive at the square. Now we gaze through the latticed window into the room and learn that the person we left there shortly before has perished, in

all likelihood murdered.

The main character has died during this one long tracking shot. The story abandons him and the film itself comes to an end. In the meantime, it's grown dark; there is light coming from the hotel restaurant to the left of the room in which the dead man has been found. A new story begins, as this one has almost imperceptibly reached its end.

There is something similar in Kerstin Drechsel's work. She discreetly approaches the objects that contain messages about the person whose room she is borrowing for her painting. It remains unclear whether she is an objective observer or a cautious invader. We have no knowledge of the stock of photographs she has accumulated. We see only a selection whose contents are put onto canvas with pencil and ruler; spaces to be filled with color. She places the meaningful alongside the meaningful, fills the canvas with accrued, precisely inspected disorder. The things depicted and the frequently heedless constellations into which they are arranged tell us something. But do they tell us something about the people who have filled these rooms? Is it not perhaps the story in our heads upon which the artist paints and in which the residents are mere fictions – fictions of a world that opposes us or seems too familiar for us to want to contemplate it more closely? What remains of the people and their past experiences? What can be read? Which stories emerge from the objects? Like amateur archeologists, we examine the material presented, and thus ourselves. Similar to the 180-degree pan shot in Antonioni's film, the gaze the artist constructs is focused on ourselves, at the same time touching upon the life of someone else.