

SEPTEMBER

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Trip Light: A conversation between Camille Norment and Oliver Koerner von Gustorf

In the last years you mainly did sound and light installations. You haven't shown drawings in a long time. How did the decision come up to focus on drawings in this exhibition?

It was more or less spontaneously. I started drawing in my notebook that I carry around all the time. I liked what I saw and so I decided to explore these drawings, to take them further and see how they turn out. Actually I would say drawing is one of my favoured modes of production because I am most comfortable with a piece of paper and a pen. I just haven't been working like this for a very long time and it has been refreshing and quite liberating to go back to that.

When I look at the structures of the "Cotton Rag" drawings they remind me of plaits of moss hanging from trees in swamps. A similar motif also appears in the edition you made for SEPTEMBER: the "Apparition Diptych" where a glimpse of a ghost or a doppelganger from the American past is seen walking through swamps reminiscent of the Louisiana bayou. How did you make the step from this digital image to the "Cotton Rag" drawings?

It was a rather unconscious development. I think the "Apparition Diptych" clearly references to the graphic wave forms of sound if you look at this dark area that goes up and down in the middle of the images. When ever I was presenting this piece I was talking about the rhythm of repetition and the graphic waveforms as a popular representation of sound these days. It is something that everybody recognizes.

You see those waves on displays of hi-fi systems and computers.

Exactly. It's part of the contemporary language of sound and music. At the same time these drawings are meditations on the theme or the cultural image of the swamp – this sultry, sexy, mysterious image of the south that nobody really knows anything about. Most people have never been there but everybody seems to be able to conjure certain memories that refer to swamp scenes in Hollywood films.

There is this mysterious figure in a white dress that lurks through the trees on the right part of the "Apparition Diptych".

Yes, I call this female figure the Apparition. Ironically she first appeared to me in 2005, shortly before hurricane Katrina hit the US. I was invited to do a spread for a magazine in Sweden. This was when I first did this image. A couple of months later we had these floods in Louisiana and I think this really solidified this image to me. And it also had this layer of superstition because suddenly we were confronted with this enormous American tragedy that was completely ignored for more than a week.

It is still being ignored. People still live in shelters in New Orleans and the infrastructure in the poor neighborhoods has not been completely rebuilt yet.

Yes, exactly. This repetition in the image suddenly became a repetition of history, of the same stories that still persist. That is something that has been lingering in my mind for a long time and probably even more since I am an expatriate. I am thinking of my own culture in a way that I didn't when I was still so close to it. Part of it is probably being homesick but a lot of this changed awareness for sure depends on having a certain distance and on understanding what's happening in the US by reading the newspaper, or seeing images on TV or in the internet. It's a very different relationship to what is going on and how the world perceives your home country. It's also a very different way to experience history and to find out how you fit in and how identity changes depending on where you live in the world - because it does change a lot.

So on one hand there are references to sound and music in your work and on the other hand it is connected to cultural memories, social and historical aspects. The black female figure in the "Apparition Diptych" for instance seems to evoke several archetypes of the old South at the same time: the southern belle, the mammy, the "magic negro" who lives in the swamps.

Yes, in a lot of Hollywood films there is this black woman who lives in a shack in the middle of a swamp. And whoever finds her has the fortune read or future told and there is this always idea of magic and superstition surrounding this figure.

It's also about eroticism.

Right, there is always this tantalizing danger that is very scary and yet seductive at the same time. On the other hand the figure on "Apparition Diptych" wears a dress from the times of the civil war, a pristine white ballroom gown that a black slave would have never worn then. And she has dreadlocks, something she either wouldn't have had or would have covered up with rags. So in this figure I mix up different historical and contemporary references.

And you mix up black and white archetypes. In "Gone with the wind" it's Scarlet O'Hara who is wearing this kind of dress.

Of course! I loved "Gone with the Wind" when I was little. But it was also a strange experience because this was a film I could never project myself into. If I did I would be a slave. I would have never been able to live in those times as Scarlet or these other white women in those big beautiful dresses. It's this kind of twisted fantasy.

Did you copy the structures on the "Rag Cotton" drawings from film stills?

No, I created them from my memory, from my idea of swamp vegetation. The gesture I use is similar to writing in a way. At the same time music is always embedded in my work. On the "Rag Cotton" drawings there is this downward pull, almost like a glissando, like tones that start heavy and pull down. The vines that are hanging on the trees amplify this movement. The gesture is very small. I don't want to say calligraphic but almost like handwriting. The gesture is very fast, very connected. I keep going until the form is satisfying and then add another one. I draw one vine at a time and think of this discontinuous shape. It's not that I'm just start left and go right. I am adding these layers of the vines at a time. It is almost like creating sentences or a musical composition.

Your mirror drawings extend this idea on a different level. In these smaller works you combined glass and mirror foil with drawing. There is this blurring reflection of yourself when you look at the image.

Conceptually I am very interested in ways to draw the viewer into the work through responding to physiological functions like seeing or the focusing of eyes. The minute the viewers ask themselves: "Are my eyes going out of focus or is it the work?" they are making a very immediate connection to the work. They are becoming participants in the experience of the work. I guess this responds to the gaze in a traditional sense, to the moment when you lose yourself in a work.

The borders between subject and object are also blurring.

Exactly, there are different layers upon which you can focus, one of them being the image of yourself. You can get obsessed with trying to get yourself clear. And then you focus one layer in and find the drawing and in another layer you find out how the drawing is reacting to the surface glass and the lighting in the room and all this together creates this hallucinatory, psychological space. At the same time the work questions if the lighting is making this effect, or my eyes or my movement. The drawing becomes an environment in a way. In this tight, minimal space you have to find out where you are and where the work is.

How much are you influenced by Minimal Art?

Formally I am very attracted to Minimalism. At the same time I am very literary and poetic. In my work I combine those two almost contradictory elements. I like to keep this delicate balance. I don't want the narrative to jump out and hit you on the head. I like that it is almost only enacted in the mind of the viewer... The titles are kind of an inroad to the narrative possibilities.

Let's talk about the Triplight – Installation. The microphone has a nostalgic design.

It's a 1955 Shure microphone. It is blues and jazz as much as it is rock from the fifties. The design of the microphone itself reflects this idea of the American fifties as these glossy, golden years: atomic family, white picket fences, two kids and a dog. At the same time the era marks one of the most intense moments when this society knew that segregation couldn't last any longer; this purist dichotomy between the god-given whites and the still subhuman blacks who are second class citizens at best. Certainly musically at this time these borders were dissolved beyond control. I was thinking a lot about how this mythology was deteriorated.

In the fifties a lot of black jazz musicians and literates moved to Paris or Northern Europe to live in a more liberal and less racist society. You also live in Scandinavia. Does "Triplight" also refer to this expatriate life?

Yes sure. But even in liberal Europe it was "exotic" in those days to have a couple of black musicians come: "Oh look at the cool black guy playing the saxophone". It wasn't really a cultural threat. It was something to be fetishized. I think there are so many things embedded in this very simple object.

If you look at the shadow that the light in the inside casts on the wall it looks like a cage or a ribcage.

You can think of the famous poem by African American poet Maya Angelou Dunbar: "I know why the caged bird sings." It's a fantastic poem and this image of the caged bird singing is a metaphor for desiring freedom, for the idea of escaping this cage. From a historical and musical point of view singing was the first and often the only possibility for African-Americans to escape. These were not things I was thinking of consciously when I was making the piece. My approach is very minimal. I was attracted to this very instantaneous combination: just the light, the microphone and then the shadow. After that I had this "conversation" with the work and discovered all these amazing things that the installation connects to. So I don't sit there and put theoretical things together to resolve them as some kind of illustrated theory. I feel I can say a lot about it and absolutely nothing. It's the nothing that created it in a way.

Your sculpture with the spinning penny on top of a pedestal is called "Juke". How did this title come up?

"Juke" is a term that means "sleazy" or "lucid" in a way. It was used for instance in "Juke Joint" which basically was another form of a shack – but in the woods, where African-Americans could go and dance and drink.

Is this where "Juke Box" comes from?

Yeah, the term "Juke Box" is derived "Juke Joints". You put a coin in a juke box and you get some music. This piece came to me when the economy was beginning to slide down and at the same time Obama was running for president. And wow, it looked like he actually might get it. It was really this time when all those crazy contradictory things were happening. It was tragic and wonderful at the same time. So I was thinking of this spinning – where is the coin going to lead? What will the outcome be? All this came down to the lowest currency denominator in the US: the penny, which happens to have the head of Abraham Lincoln on it who was the president that abolished slavery. That's why I chose the 2008 penny specifically. That's the year that Obama was elected and also the year we really established the confirmation of the economic crisis and we still are waiting for the outcome. The penny is still spinning.