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Capricci of the 21st century – The Landscape of Hell Gette

By Dr. Bernhart Schwenk, curator at Moderne München

These little beings appear disturbing, with their eyes wide open, looking skywards and their hands widely open, as they seem to dash out of the large-sized painting by Hell Gette, directly onto the observer. These beings vaguely recall the “Scream” versions by Edvard Munch (originated around 1900), the “Pumuckl” by Barbara von Johnson (around 1960) or the “Friedens-Siemens” by André Butzer (from 2000 on). However, Hell Gette’s beings own no individuality whatsoever, they look cloned. These are indeed standardized icons, so-called emojis, which Gette transfers into her pastose paintings. More precisely, they are zombie-emojis, which were first introduced by the technology company Apple in the year 2017. A precise “terminus post quem” for dating issues of future art historians. The title of Hell Gette’s painting implicates a zombie-theme, as it chains a hashtag and three emojis (woman zombie - brain - man zombie), followed by the bracketed and hashtagged word “walkingdead”.

The zombie-emojis in the painting do not storm out of nowhere, they seem to pour out of an exotic landscape: palm trees and desert sand suscite associations to the north of Africa, where European painters were drawn to the particular light conditions about 100 years ago. Amongst them were August Macke, Franz Marc and Paul Klee. Hell Gette’s painting “The Landscape” virtually glows. The blood-red sky arches over the luminous orange of the sandy ground and a white-yellow sun sets in the far horizon. However, opposed to the paintings of the classical modernist artists, the intensity of the colors appear unnatural but naively fascinating. Because of its perceived (image)-high temperature, the fiery scenario seems threatening and the peculiar palm trees convey far more than the mere exotic strangeness. The observer is actually irritated and despite his curiosity, is held at a distance by this offensively, declaimed artificiality of the portrayed atmosphere. This artificiality is not only conducted by the emojis but also by all the other elements of the image, which now presents itself less as a landscape but more as a cliché of a landscape. Whether the palm trees, clouds, suns or lightnings, the subjects of the painting seem to be artificial like pictograms. They appear to be cut and pasted rather badly and then edited with Photoshop tools. Indeed, this deliberately casual method characterizes Hell Gette’s artistic approach.

Now, artificiality does not present something new within art historic traditions of landscape painting. Up until around the year 1600, landscapes were the setting for mythological and historical narratives, i.e. the landscape adapted to the subject accordingly. Even later, as landscapes developed into independent pictorial subjects and despite the focused interest in the portrayal of nature or light phenomena, artists would still keep their distance from true-to-life, realistic representations. Landscapes remained a painter-imagined segment of the world, put together from real and imaginary parts, idealized, equipped with staffages, or like in the age of romanticism set as a “mindscape”.

An explicitly artificial spin-off in the art of the Baroque Age, is the so-called “Capriccio”. The origin of the term is uncertain, however, etymological research suspects a composition of the Italian words “capo” (head) and “riccio” (hedgehog), literally meaning “hedgehog-head” or rather “scatterbrain”. These paintings rarely show mere landscape areas, but much rather places for a free gathering of figures and objects. Typical for the Capriccio was the deliberate blurring of conventions of pictorial genres, which were otherwise hierarchically separated from each other (history/tale, portrait, genre, landscape, still life - in exactly this order). Artists thus playfully redefined rules and boundaries and consequently made bold use of freedoms, which in retrospect can be seen as the first foundation of anti-academic Modernism.

With that being said, it is appealing to consider Hell Gette’s landscapes as Capricci of the 21st century. The contemporary aspect lies in the fact, that her works integrate the conflict between the analogue and the digital world playfully into the work process - “conflict” implicating not a critical, rather the original neutral meaning of the word “conflict”, suggesting an “impact”. This happens when the artist combines her findings on the internet and the connected digital tools - with the hand-drawn, the photographs taken with the mobile phone, the experimental prints or graphically (sometimes not so well) designed, bringing it all back to the traditional oil painting, thus reflecting a highly contemporary concept of painting and treating all media equally.

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156 Sec. 4 Xinyi Road Taipei Taiwan

+886-2-27527002 www.eachmodern.com

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At the same time, Hell Gette's paintings emphasize how strongly our experiences today are not only influenced by pictorial templates (of the arts, the movies, television, advertisement, social media, etc). Moreover, they show that even our feelings can be expressed by patterns or icons, letting the body go through a subtle estrangement from an immediate perception, providing that such a perception, in its pure form has ever existed. However, Hell Gette articulates this in her paintings rather as an observation than criticism.

Criticism would only become legible if the receptor, connected narrative content with the image. Namely if, for example “#walkingdead” would be seen as a future apocalyptic landscape. This would not be a vision of a catastrophe with exploding luminaries and burning cities, as Ludwig Meidner had already painted prior to the First World War. Such an apocalyptic vision of catastrophe would be thought of as a horror scenario, which would effect humanity's entire living environment - a climatic catastrophe. Such would turn the subject of the painting “#walkingdead” from an overwrought artistic imagination (or a US-television series, whose title Hell Gette borrowed) into relentless reality.