

“The spectacle in general, as the concrete inversion of life, is the autonomous movement of the nonliving. (...) It is the heart of the unrealism of the real society. (...) It is the sun which never sets over the empire of modern passivity. It covers the entire surface of the world and bathes endlessly in its own glory.” Guy Debord

SYNNE GENZMER

Ariadne mise-en-abyme

About the rhetorical figures and painted conditions in Asgar/Gabriel

Lip gloss, smooth skin, young, slender, body conscious, good-looking. Somewhere between 15 and 30. Summer. Sunshine. Beach. Boats. Bathing. Barbecuing. Relaxing. Rose-coloured Hubba-Bubba bubbles. Marshmallows. An inflatable plastic palm tree. A combed dog. Here and there graffiti. A plush elephant. Canned beer. Sex. Hanging out. Disillusioned? 2011. A bit of trash. A bit of flesh. Garish. Cool. Sexy. Pop. Market compatible.

Or: Naked. Long hair. Living in harmony with nature. Swimming. Fishing. Campfire. Hunting and gathering. Managing on your own. Dropping out. Somehow dreamlike. Watching the sun go down. Singing. To the strumming of a guitar. Perhaps “If you’re going to San Francisco...”. Community. Smoking hash. Summer of love. 1968 Revival. Dreaming of bourgeois revolution? Here and there psychedelic explosions of colour in pink, yellow, turquoise. Flower Power in plastic and synthetic fabrics. Somehow romantic.

Or: Self-confident, relaxed, exhilarated. Being human in Arcadia. Ambrosia. Music. Androgynous, free, mythical, exalted. In a hedonistic paradise? Titian, Rubens, Michelangelo. 1520. Here and there a rush of abstract colour. Gericault. Goya. Delacroix. 1848. A passion for the image. The masterpiece. The icon. The medium. The situationist avant-garde. “Under the Paving Stones, the Beach”. The pictorial surface.

In 1977, when the exhibition *Pictures*, curated by Douglas Crimp, through aesthetic appropriation strategies established the concept of “postmodern” in connection with the reception of a new generation of conceptual artists who (re)turned to the (iconic) image, it was about a search for “structures of signification” that constitute iconic value, and about layers, since “underneath each picture there is always another picture”.¹ Aesthetic strategies included: “quotation, excerption, framing, and staging”.² Among the works critical of modernist concepts of originality, authenticity, and authorship were – not surprisingly – few that used painting as their medium. The appearance of the so-called “Pictures Generation” was retrospectively called one of the “most important moments in the gradual integration of photography into the mainstream of contemporary art”.³ Appropriation initially meant using another’s picture, reproducing existing iconicity, and thus meant the (renewed) entry of the phenomena of mass communications into the sphere of art.

In many respects Asgar/Gabriel’s paintings belong in the categories of appropriation characterized by a production aesthetic that celebrates the eclectic play with citation and flirts with the beauty of the popular and the affective charge of the coded pictorial content. The way their paintings are constructed reflects the conditions and habits of observation in the electronic age, which have since changed, as well as the utilization of digital software in a traditional medium. Their painterly means include the technology that corresponds to the conventional advertisement style in their works: the

construction of images in Photoshop from a data pool – as an authorial approach. At the same time it is precisely this painterly execution that characterizes their artistic strategy, because it brings about an ambiguity of artistic signature, structurally containing that which is programmatically visualized. Each picture by Asgar/Gabriel involves a lengthy, exacting process including discussions, examinations, selection and reproduction, as the subject of an image is composed of numerous fragments of information. In concrete terms, the representation of a human figure ultimately consists of several parts from different body models, turned this way and that and put together. The friends in the photographs who posed for the model pictures cannot be recognized later on. Models for plastic palm trees or a comical dog face can also be found on the World Wide Web. The complete composition is finally sketched on the computer before the first preliminary drawing is made in oil, and the colouring can begin. The pictorial aesthetic reflects the practice of montage. Copy. Paste. Shift. Go back. Repeat. Save. Asgar/Gabriel create a palimpsest of representation, the layered quality of which sets up a complex network of relations. Diverse categories of signs – symbol, index, icon – by way of *trompe l'oeil* seem homogenized with respect to their referential quality, and perfect simulation effects ensure that the mimetic serves as a common denominator. The ostensible semiotic difference sets the perspective/ideological space reeling – literally as well as metaphorically. Bodies merge with the illusion of colour running down the canvas or dissolve in a neon-coloured *sfumato* blur that seems to have been sprayed on. Colour runs into the inter faces of the montage process, creating unity and at the same time calling attention to the effect. That we are dealing with a negotiation of symbols having to do with indexicality is once more indicated by abstract, graphic, formal elements at the centres or points of movement in the pictorial composition, marking dynamism in the manner of comic books – “Splash”! – for example the spraying of water in *reeling in the net* (2009) or *lake monster hunt* (2009) – and breaking out of the aesthetic unity as an ironic comment on themselves. Under water, so to speak, this formal option is continued as a sort of calyx-shaped aura which, encircling the picture’s centre of energetics like a whirlpool, opens the pictorial space towards a bright place. Being sucked into an uncertain space becomes the representational content in *men and women mad with fear* (2009) and *in den fängen des roten oktopus* (2009). Reeling bodies are drawn into a lit-up nothingness. From the mythological sea monster’s red arms, which resonate formally with the abstract elements, a gender-indifferent human figure with female facial features and a masculine body build wriggles out. A re-coded Medusa. The garishly coloured, ornamental aura recurs as a symbol-like, stylistic effect in many of Asgar/Gabriel’s paintings. It can accentuate protagonists, a light source, an auditive phenomenon such as sound, and for the most part defines a non-mathematical vanishing point hidden by a group of figures or blurred by an area of colour. In this multiplied pictorial space, not just signifiers in the self-referential *l’art pour l’art* sense are being thoroughly declined, demonstrating the production of the product. It is also about an aesthetic strategy for producing meaning that has to do with constantly breaking up perspective depth, leading motifs astray and freeing figures from their anchoring in the ground.

“The image, which also displays the level of reflection on itself and reaches into the deep stratum beneath it, has to overcome something – a caesura, a gap, a cleft, an abyss. It is not always the case that this abyss is actually presented with complete fidelity to the motif”, Rainer Metzger comments, locating romanticist tendencies in contemporary painting, and continues: “Yet one of the central statements of modernism is that there is no straightforward line from one level to the next, thus the self-duplication of an image is something different from a simple image within an image. This is part of the heritage of Romanticism.”⁴

Although nature as the elevated bearer of the expression of a subjective encounter with the world and experience is of minor importance in Asgar/Gabriel's work, the idea of visualizing an "abyss" in connection with the medial "underneath" of the appropriated image, which "itself intimates the abysmal", is nevertheless not far from the mounted structure of their paintings. "The references of the images can by no means be located in some mutual adjacency. Rather, they arise in interstices, like sudden flashes, they emerge in the below, as the treasure trove of what has been seen often, and they emerge in the above *qua* the level of reflection on which we become aware that what we perceive directly cannot be everything."⁵

Appropriation in Asgar/Gabriel's work initially means a "dérive" from the history of art, whereby romantic masterpieces such as Delacroix' *Liberty Leading the People* (1830) or Géricault's *Raft of Medusa* (1819) are "recouped" in the same way as motifs borrowed from baroque genre painting and mythological representations. The isolation and exaggeration of theatrical formulas for pathos, "posing and composing"⁶ based on renaissance, mannerist, baroque, romantic and symbolist models, is a form of play reminiscent of the practice of *Tableau Vivant*, which also resounds in the formulation of a performative, momentary quality in Asgar/Gabriel's paintings. The painting *Auflösung der Ökonomie* (2010) cites the donkey head in Titian's *Bacchus and Ariadne* (1520-3). The representation of the wine god was bound to the subject of the story, which legitimized the (semi-covered) nude figure in terms of content as it represented the incarnation of a divine figure or ideal concept. The scene showing a heap of naked bodies in Asgar/Gabriel's bacchanal – freely interpreted after Bataille as a wish-come-true world of an intoxicated existence beyond economic dependency, pursuit of profit and efficiency thinking, a placeless dream of surrender to the superfluous – is represented virtually rather than imitated, but with the effect of a reduplication of souvenir and attitude that goes back to the pictorialization or embodiment in the "living pictures".⁷ The accumulation of iconic set pieces gives rise to poses, paraphrases and pieced-together bodies, charged with the symbolic added value of the historical meaning of their models, or rather, with a related likeness, to which a diffuse, nebulous memory of something familiar responds. For Asgar/Gabriel's girls hardly look like Titian's original Ariadne (a clothed, plump female figure turning away and being pursued). Even so, it is a sculptural model approaching the classicist ideal that appears as an Ariadne on the stage of Asgar/Gabriel's tableaux. Depicted typologically, she represents the female gender, stands for the collective, and is in this sense uniform, not individualistic. In her multiplied, summary appearance, the female figure comes closer to being an allegory, simulating an ideal state, than to being a subject. She is the embodiment of a vision more than an individual and under the surface substantially divided – an image, coupled to an origin as multi-faceted and heterogeneous as the foil on which she is depicted. Representing the social ideals of beauty and youth typical of her time and at the same time contrasted to them as a hollow, meaningless, medial formula, she is conceived as a phantom, circulating independently of its origin and borrowing its neat make-up for an emancipated gesture – the representation of an omnipresent active female gender. Identity before the abyss of medial construction. Performative.

Like Ariadne or Medusa, the plastic palm tree, the plush elephant, the colour pink and the situationist slogans are also rhetorical figures. Asgar/Gabriel work with formulas for affects that are articulated on the surface as composition, as the mutual syntactical relationship of elements capable of lending a collective pattern of events the expression of a formal, ecstatic sensation. The symbol of happiness in *Auflösung der Ökonomie* as a state of wasteful, lust-oriented, pure consumption at the same time demonstrates its decadent reverse side as a mannerist echo of the capitalist (media) society oriented towards the spectacular – the history of our time. Asgar/Gabriel's aesthetic of

liberally mixing things brings out the transgressive potential of painted pictures by infiltrating the semiotic field of the canvas and ironically questioning the ideological categories of value in the field of artistic production and cultural experience. The artistic duo's pictorial inventions force a dialectic that elevates normative difference through aesthetic adaptation and thus cancels its fall: High and low, the serious and the entertaining, avant-garde and kitsch, masculinity and femininity, information and originality. It is not about depicting one's own surroundings, but about a *détournement* of the (model) picture, about recognizing the pictorial medium itself as a utopian entity, the iconicity of which has an arbitrary connection to social reality and ideology, because it can be filled with a new content and absorbed over and over again, but manifests itself within an ideologically occupied frame that always limits the artificial – in Asgar/Gabriel's work synonymous with the painted – that is to be occupied.

Notes:

1. Douglas Crimp, "Pictures" in *October*, vol. 8 (Spring, 1978), p. 87.
2. *ibid.*
3. Douglas Eklund, *The Pictures Generation 1974-1984*, exhibition catalogue. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Yale University Press, New Haven and London, p. 8.
4. Rainer Metzger, "The Abyss of Images" in *Ideal Worlds. New Romanticism in Contemporary Art*, published by Max Hollein and Martina Weinhart, Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt, 2005, p. 58.
5. *ibid.*, p. 62.
6. Asgar/Gabriel in an interview with Karla Diaz.
7. See *Tableaux Vivants. Lebende Bilder un Attitüden in Fotografie, Film, Video*, published by Sabine Folie, Michael Glasmeier, Gerald Matt, Kunsthalle Wien, 2002.