



“From Ludicrous to Lucidity”

The work of Herwig Kienzl.

Contemporary art is braved in both radical and provincial terms and for someone like me, who perhaps should develop a more compulsory position if I'm going to write about such topics, am amused to great lengths in the disparity in the artists' approach in such a land of agricultural grandeur. Sure there's the antics of the “Goo Squad” and the cosmetic hysterics of her “poor fortunate one” persona and the countries' real claim to notoriety but doesn't know it, their own dark prince who's the only one with nerve enough to summon up mystic truths from the nonsensical, and then there's the soft shell anecdotes of “one minute sculptures”. But if one allows themselves to take pause and be anesthetized long enough from this banner parade they may discover in the distance another way...

“A man's home is his castle, atelier and fitness centre.”

Burg Seebenstein, 47°41'44"N 16°8'39"E Niederösterreich.

To keep warm one forages through a near by forest. Trees are marked to designate which can be cut down, chopped up, bundled and carried back over the draw bridge covering the mote leading to the castle. The spindles are carried on the back of the keeper (the artist), of this mid evil fortress which is standard operational procedure. Our host has been carrying supplies of up to 40 to 50 kilos arranged in a tight configuration designed to stabilize and not pitch this human cable car off center during the almost 2000 meter ascent up to a hut, twice a day starting around 1976 at 19.

“A” toilet is one of the sparse hints of modern conveniences and is across the courtyard where one finds them selves briefly outside to enter. It is advised to wear a helmet during the windy season. Two liters of water is scooped out of a shallow well and is poured into the bowl in order to flush. A tariff is paid upon ones return inside. Back into the main section of the castle before going back up stairs, there's a room off to the right where the wood is stored and separated by type. At this point one realizes why they were given a large plastic barrel with straps when living for the toilet. To return the barrel strapped to your back less than full with wood (that burns in an enormous ceramic tile oven in the kitchen that spreads warmth through out the only area that is habitable during this time of year in April), would prove embarrassing and carries its own consequences.

The methods of Herwig Kienzl are heroic if for no other reason that they are self induced and exemplify the ingenuity of function over form with punishing reliability. Herwig almost instinctively engages in labor intensive processes to uphold a mantra of self sufficiency such as wrestling tree stumps from the grounds of his sanctuary that in the end makes sense with in the framework of his lifestyle as well as his Oeuvre.

Formally there had always been a preoccupation with snakes and the graphic kaleidoscopic patterns that their skin would provide as source material. Serigraphs, ink drawings, paintings and photographs depicting these snakes with voluptuous tattooed women entwined prove alarming no matter what surface and with what medium they are applied.

Large skins cut from canvas with acrylic contain the most dispatch to allegory. These forms sustain the foundation in the origin of his source material yet diverge into abstraction enough to display the cunningness in his method and accomplish a metaphorically rich body of work. These “skins” range from 2 to 3 meters in height and 1 meter in width and play with the notion of being examples of a new line of surf boards and or shields should his citadel come under attack.

Still “snakes with fat girls” would emerge from the thicket where I would find myself keying on peripheral details illustrating metal awning designs to compensate for their didacticism and then...

**...“Kreuz des Leidens” (the cross of suffering) Easter 2009.
Stainz bei Straden, AUT.**

Herwig Kienzl had the taller 12 meter metal cross with its electric coiled light-tubing (you get at IKEA for €2. per meter) removed and replaced it with his own smaller rustic version of two thick wooden planks. The obligatory sacrificial wood -carved lamb pierced with a steel rod is draped at the intersection of the cross. He then took it upon himself “true to form” to wrap three large trees with a green translucent plastic and placed lamps inside that would transform each into tall angular night lanterns.

It was almost farcical to watch this single person perform such an arduous task plumb-lined to a boom-crane. He would ascent and decent in circular rotations around each tree with a heavy role of industrial plastic tethered to the same hydraulic mechanics maneuvered by remote control harnessed to the belt of an operator on the ground. Seeing this through the wind shield of a car while approaching the site was like watching someone wrestle an alligator and rendering it submissive enough to put duck tape around its mouth. Instead it was nature being harassed in the form of trees squeezed to produce abstract form, reversing the natural function of a snake shedding its skin. This would take two full days and nobody took his place.

At first I had reservations in the formal qualities of the finished result. There are people in Florida that do that to their palms when it gets cold in January. But when I ventured back from half a kilometer’s distance it was stunning to see at the onset of twilight with the sun just above the rural farmland horizon, three vertically extended lanky towers and their vascular acrid green skin as if in bondage, carving light in and around its thorny interiors. The insistence of the gesture enforcing its will and denying nature its entitled majestic splendor, and co horsed to give way to “Herr Kienzl’s” vision was fresh with brutal elegance amongst this bountiful terrain. In this absurd sadism giving way to new form, Herwig exploits the paradox where in the act to constrict and conceal an ulterior and abstract beauty is revealed.

At this year’s Easter festivities in Stainz bei Straden in lower Austria, the artist re-enacts the biological function of his own source material. Herwig Kienzl shed his own skin giving light to the latent clarity that long seemed dormant under the layers of his fetishistic impulses and performing a work I wish I had done in no other fashion.

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