

Real Feelings are Mixed

Jan Brokof, born in 1977, grew up in the eastern part of Germany, there where the “German Democratic Republic” displayed a double dose of “us”-feeling and the pumping advance of industrialized socialism simulated a permanent grand beginning. In his 2004 installation “P2”, conceived primarily with the aid of woodcuts, the artist already showed the flags and wallpapers under which everything mildewed so amicably. In the language of the East German planners, “P2” was the abbreviation for the type of pre-fab slab construction with which they covered the country in the 1960s and that petrified the face of Brokof’s home city, Schwedt.

East Germany’s new-construction areas with their concrete-blocked promises for the future presented themselves as open feel-good ghettos with solidarity, and yet clung everywhere to the Party’s web of rules, as stupidly merciless as the tiled façades. O people of the future, you who after the end of your shift scurry past the showcase windows of the economy of scarcity, how happy you were in your weekend garden plots and after-hours niches. The great dream of liberated life under the dictatorship of the proletariat – nothing but constriction in a small world of nested room dividers.

To illuminate orderliness as part of the German legacy, to investigate its specific kind of ornamentics, and to provide a depiction of the people who still live there – this is what Jan Brokof sees as his noblest task. He fulfills it to a perfect fit and in great detail, with plenty of experience to work from.

His interest thereby is less taste or his own childhood memories than the East’s historical self-location in its inhabitants’ faces and emotions and housing. His ink and pencil drawings, stamp prints, woodcuts, colored paper collages, and pictures of buildings in lacquer on wood show

that, when it comes to this theme, the real feelings are mixed ones.

His ink pictures from the year 2007, architectonically conceived and constructively designed without the viscous melancholy with which the retrospective of life in the East is often plastered over, are devoted without prejudice to the trace elements of socialist surface decoration.

Brokof's woodcuts show views of cities and quote the children's-handicrafts naiveté with which the future was anticipated and glued together in East German day-care centers. The artist is a typical child of the period of the collapse of communism, touched by the patina of history and socialized in one of Schwedt's hip-hop bands, so one believes the lack of sentimentality with which he takes the role of deciphering artist in addressing social life.

While in Germany news piles up of the demolition of "crowns of the socialist city" from East German days, and indeed the trend seems to be to ban an entire stratum of time from the city's appearance, Jan Brokof manages to transpose the amusement and the wistfulness he feels when he sees certain wall and façade decors into his pictures and especially into his expansive installations.

But this has little to do with retro chic – more with attitudes spread by bands like "Herr Nilsson", in which Jan Böttcher writes lyrics like "We are three grandchildren of rubble-clearing women... we have to keep on building." Precisely because a counter-movement is currently spreading, namely the rediscovery of East German residential buildings as found in Berlin's Marzahn and Hohenschönhausen districts, where young people cover over their "slab" with the remnants of their parents' wallpaper, a critical gaze is needed.

Jan Brokof is anything but nostalgic for communist East

Germany. He is able to evoke the atmosphere in which actual and current history, factological and the prettified history (in which myths, projections, and constructions live on) hold each other in check.

In this light, the love of East German pre-fab slab constructions that many artists and contrarians are currently developing may seem a little romantically “anti-bourgeois”. As a contrast to the retro mainstream, but also to the billion-dollar federal program to “strengthen the cities in the new federal states as residential and economic sites”, which does not really aim to remodel but to dismantle eastern German cities, here is a sign of an intellectual turnaround that should not be underestimated.

Christoph Tannert · 2007