

Jan Brokof: (No longer) being part of a youth movement

A man seeks his luck in porno paradise.

Grandma with scarf, apple cheeks and shopping bag.

Chubby woman wearing leggings, without make-up.

Standing pissers from behind, a cheerful masturbator and copulating hand puppets.

A computer gamer breaks the seventh level, gorgeous woman in a gorgeous dress.

Monsters dances and wink with clubs, ghosts grin in uniform.

Roaring mini gorillas, placarded bears, friendly girl monkeys.

Hooded types go walkies, masked figures in the spotlight.

Sleeping feet, sprouting boot fungi.

Goon, hell boy, rock 'n' roll Lemmy!

A double premiere

Book open, stage clear: Jan Brokof's figurations on paper have finally come together for a joint appearance – from life and drawn with graphite.

Jan Brokof largely became attained recognition in recent years with his views of prefabricated buildings and cities; they have won numerous awards and have been exhibited internationally. That he – as an convinced graphic artist – favors ink and pencil drawings alongside woodcuts, not only expands the media into the space, but also increasingly interconnects them, has been expressed particularly clearly in his most recent exhibitions.¹

The publication series *Signifikante Signaturen* of the Ostdeutsche Sparkassenstiftung now offers the foundation for a premiere in a two-fold manner: The selection of works presented here is dedicated for the first time exclusively to Brokof's graphite works on paper that focuses particularly on the figural. Its assembly has been furthermore been realized in the form of a publication which gave the artist as much design freedom as possible. An exhibition in book form, as it were, that comes very close to the media of the artist's book that seems so eminently predestined for Brokof's small-format, unconventional drawings, particularly as they have been supplemented by several works especially produced for this context.

FIGURES

¹ 2009 "Gehäuse" galerie baer | raum für aktuelle kunst, Dresden; "BAUT- Baut auf Tour" with Alfredo Bautista, Theo Boettger, Martin Böttger, Delikatessenhaus | Leipzig; 2008 "SOMMERLOCH"; SOX Berlin; 2007 "Bilder im Mittelgang", Galerie Pankow, Berlin; "Unter dem Pflaster, da liegt der Strand", Städtisches Kunstmuseum Spendhaus Reutlingen; "Schöne neue Welt", Institut für Auslandsbeziehungen, Berlin etc.

figure =

To represent by or as if by a figure or outline

To decorate with a pattern

Synonyms: cast, compose, decorate, draw, effigy, embellish illustrate

figure, plural: figures =

a: geometric form b: bodily shape or form especially of a person c: an object noticeable only as a shape or form

a prominent personality

the graphic representation of a form especially of a person or geometric entity²

“Figures” – a suitable title for a book, the design of which was conceived by the artist himself and which gathers together a whole series of curious figures.

Many of Jan Brokof’s previously exhibited woodcuts and ink drawings depict schematized urban scenes, rows of houses and streets that particularly have one thing in common: they are deserted. That his figurations have only rarely been exhibited up to now, and then only in an accompanying fashion, conceals the fact that they have always played an important role especially in his drawings and have grown into regular populations in the meanwhile.

They are figures ranging from the schematic to the lapidary that mostly turn their backs to us, face away, are masked or faceless or stare into the void.

Almost every figure appears upon first glance to stand for themselves: Brokof devotes each one of them their own sheet of paper and positions them in the center as the main actor, usually without a narrative context. Their surroundings are not very significant: fences, a shelf, a window view or curtain, a few blades of grass or houses – always truncated and roughly suggested.

The noticeably large number of persons seen from behind – here someone pissing on a wall, there someone dressed in briefs, a woman with long hair wearing a dress – do not play the usual role as familiarizers as is the case in the works of art historical precursors à la Caspar David Friedrich. And when they do, they play out their role in a different way. Instead of gliding in reflection-stimulating, long-sighted and nature-inspired backgrounds, our glances and theirs collide with house façades, walls, truncated horizons or – coarsely hatched darkness. Even the rare open views of cities, meadows or parks do not promise much. They seem disguised, abstracted and interchangeable. The figures from Romantic art seen from behind have only their curious other-worldliness with Brokof’s figures in common which seem more isolated and disillusioned than contemplative and spiritualized – as if imprisoned in the here and now.

² <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/figure>

They are joined by animals, play figures and fantastic creatures – some roaring, stomping, gesticulating, others dancing and smiling, almost never really threatening. The little monster thus appears to be yawning instead of roaring, the bear flashing its teeth on the poster is not in fact real, a procession full of ghosts and devils proves to be a children's carnival and the masked person in the spotlight somehow seems surprised himself.

It is the *Figure*-like that connects all of them. It is expressed in schemes, masks, disguises and exaggerated gestures, appears strange and yet somehow familiar.

Melody and Rhythm

On the book cover under the publication title, we are greeted by a drawn figure of a woman smiling in a friendly fashion wearing a folkloristic costume. Her photographed counterpart in wood and the mirror-inverted title appear for a second on the back of the book. The illustration of a picture wall on the inner covers provides for a comparable bracket which, along with the superimposed text JAN BROKOF FIGURES, opens the picture pages, only to end in a negative print (pictures as well as text reversed, black and white inverted). It shows a detail from the piece "Melody and Rhythm," a collection of spontaneous free ink, graphite and collaged sketches that he continuously expands and rearranges, providing him with the space to experiment freely. "Melody and Rhythm" functions here like a parable because it reveals Jan Brokof's working method without completely decoding his pictures. Just as the individually framed and tightly hung exhibits on the picture wall occasion ever new associations for the viewer, leafing through the book's pages also makes connections in terms of form and content possible. Pictorial motifs that run through Brokof's entire oeuvre – façades, windows, figures from behind, fists, boots, posters – regularly leap to the eye. He translates simplified forms and structures as well as the hard-edged aesthetic we are familiar with from his woodcuts and which themselves can be traced back to printing techniques while drawing into schematic contours, coarse hatchings and trenchant free surfaces. At the same time, the "imperfect made-made" that was always the counterbalance of his works, transforming reproductions into unique works, increasingly get a chance. With the sentence "Try to draw a perfect square freehand," the artist alludes to autonomies, but also to the challenges of free drawing that, in comparison with working with the printing plate, still enables the most direct access to the world.

Brokof shows how nuanced the differences between depth, surface as well as various levels of reality and fiction can be depicted with a reduced range of black and white. His collage-like suites comprising completed works on paper, newly produced sketches, cut out photographs and writing provide for an overlapping of everyday life, the world of the fairy tale and the media, science fiction, comics and folklore. Whether using printing techniques or working

freehand, he exploits all conceivable means of expression and produces connections between them. In book form, the whole becomes even more attractive because it is itself a reproducible printed matter and stimulates further reflections regarding typecasting, individuality, everyday and media reality. Between the front and back book covers, the artist evokes many more associative contexts and comparative seeing than the individual pages initially would allow one to guess at, and thus provides for many melodies and rhythms in a literal and a figurative sense.

Live your life, love your home

Jan Brokof's career began in 2005 with his piece "Jugendzimmer" [Children's Room] for which he reconstructed the living space of his childhood home in Schwedt/Oder to scale in an accessible woodcut installation. The reproduced "memory space" was part of the long-term "P2" project devoted to the prefabricated housing in which he himself grew up in East Germany.³ After the fall of the Berlin Wall, many of these standardized prefabricated housing settlements mutated into ghost towns or social hot spots due to the loss of jobs and sinking population. The artist's own experiences and memories of East German residential architecture served in subsequent years as the starting point for more generally valid dealings with the influence of global urban changes on social processes and identity formation. If one reads his model-like cityscapes against this backdrop as stylized descriptions of urban living spaces, we now encounter a cross section of the inhabitants of these living spaces in *Signifikante Signaturen*:

A woman dressed in a striped pullover and leggings who wears her house shoes on the street. A man wearing a visored cap and sweat suit wandering about before a front door bearing the promising sign "Paradise." The grandmother packed in a scarf and winter coat carrying home her groceries. Children playing carnival in front of the town wall. A person of short stature with a circular bald spot who pisses against a house wall; a long-haired fellow in a uniform coat and baseball bat – or the two adolescents with an attack dog in the park who bury their faces in hoods.

Not exactly glossy pictures, no glamour or chic. Normal people, the socially deprived, welfare recipients, a little subculture. Classes of the population who mainly settle on the outskirts of the city and society although they have long no longer been marginal phenomena. While some of them are summarized in the "Problemviertel" [Problem Area] series, all of them appear loosely spread out in the catalog and seen in relation to personal sketches and products of the imagination. Jan Brokof describes *types* of people here instead of identifiable

³ See, comprehensively, Susanne Altmann in "Jan Brokof – Wohnkomplexe," exh. cat. Marion Ermer Stiftung zur Förderung von Kunst und Kultur in Sachsen und Thüringen, Dresden 2005, pp. 6-9; Christoph Tannert: "Die wahren Gefühle sind die gemischten," in "Jan Brokof - Bilder im Mittelgang," exh. cat. Galerie Pankow, Berlin 2007, p. 1; Wolfgang Holler in "Jan Brokof - Unter dem Pflaster, da liegt der Strand," exh. cat. Städtisches Kunstmuseum Spendhaus Reutlingen, Altenburg 2007, pp. 21-24.

personalities, as can be seen in such titles as “Glücksucher” [Luck Seeker], “Frau, ungeschminkt” [Woman, not made up], “Pinkler” [Pisser], “Schläger” [Thug] and “Brandenburger.” He describes the clichés we think we know for that what they are: shells, figures, façades whose own lives resound softly in just a few details.

The ambivalence characteristic of the artist from his own handwriting and coarsely drawn stereotyping provides for an idiosyncratic social study that sensitively approaches without rushing to judgment. It registers and ironizes social phenomena of everyday life without holding back on his own sensitivities or falling prey to cynicism.

(No longer) being part of a youth movement

I want to be a part of a youth movement

I want to be able to rely on you

Und all our hand movements have a particular meaning

*Because we are a movement.*⁴

Starting from his own biographical memories, the everyday life of the adolescent, the transitional phase between childhood and adulthood as the most distinctive developmental phase in the search for identity, runs like a main artery through Brokof's work. Many of his figures wear youth culture insignia (cowls, patches, combat boots or hooded jumpers), meet in gangs, swing bats and fists, placard their walls and scheme their way through computer games. Every piece of clothing, every gesture and attitude expresses their search for meaning and orientation, their desire to belong as well as to isolate themselves in addition to their idols, dreams, frustrations and aggressions.

The most interesting parts of the catalog are those where transitions to the worlds open up which are already behind us or still ahead of us: Here childhood full of naivety and imagination, with hand puppets, plush toys and terrycloth ghosts. There adulthood that plays out between monotonous views from the window, book shelf, supermarket, going to bed and the cemetery. It usually remains unclear whether the portrayed spring up from the imagination of a child, the idle dream of an adolescent or the nostalgic look back of an adult. Where the wild things are is also where the Hells Angels and babushkas prowl.

Likewise open and inconclusive is whom or what is being rebelled against or fought for here. Is the club-swinging creature dancing for or against capitalism? Is the combat boot protruding from the pasture a metaphor for blossoming or beaten fascism? Does the path behind Motörhead Lemmy lead to rock 'n' roll heaven or to a dead end? Many motions come to nothing, freeze into pure gestures and appear curiously unmotivated.

⁴ Z/ Tocotronic (1993)

Jan Brokof (born 1977) belongs to a generation that in its adult existence between work and family planning is reviving the memory of its own childhood and youth. In the process, former idols run into the self-reflection of today – rebellion meets retro.

With “capitulation,” the German Indie rock band Tocotronic has given a name to this attitude towards life of the “over 30s” – and, like Brokof, leave everyone to decide for themselves whether the voluntary capitulation is a frustrated fatalism or a timely fighting concept against all the false ideals.

Jan Brokof’s naïve caricaturizing drawing style recalling Art Brut and Outsider Art oscillates between autobiographical experiences, everyday observations, the conceived and the medially produced. Despite social critical traction and stereotypical dreariness, the artist retains a normal, almost childishly spontaneous view of things.

It is children’s carnival in the problem area – dance the capitalism, hell boys!
I suffice for myself, good night friends...

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