

## **In All Seriousness**

Dark, faceless figures, a bawling infant in a stroller, the company logos of cheap discount stores, banker types, angry people with tattoos, zombies with wrinkled faces and empty eye sockets, stumbling people, falling people, people swept away, crumbling houses, shreds of words, fragments of people, lots of black and little colour—Theo Boettger creates a pandemonium of modern life on the brink of the abyss in his large-format watercolours. As an artist, he deals with topics in everyday life by pitting himself against the demoralising details of social inequities, the impertinence of the media, and hopeless human fates in his paintings.

In his pictures, he addresses exclusion, life balanced in the margins and condemned there to desperation, explosion, and failure. Black holes and spiral forms that have been incorporated into the collage, bursts of black colour emanating from fierce brush strokes, chaotic compositions of simultaneous actions—all of these endow the realistic elements in the images with even greater intensity.

The artist eschews banal descriptions in his images, interrupting his narratives with symbols and commentaries comprised of word fragments, as if to slow down the viewer's observations by requiring a large amount of time for decoding. For there is, in principle, nothing written in these paintings that could not also be seen. Where people act like the black-and-white characters in a comic strip, one person can be exchanged for the other; the stories in the speech bubbles become a parallel reality that functions as a spark for the painterly discovery of form.

For Theo Boettger, codification does not mean disguising facts. Even though many story sequences are given only in fragments, a mood of grim critique always pierces through all filters of artistic alienation. Distance and identification seem to have congealed into a constant state of fierce struggle with one another. The artist does not allow himself the cool distance of an analyst, nor does he deliver a plain and simple sociocritical evaluation of the situation. His images derive their clarity from the topicality of their subjects and their deep seriousness, even though this seriousness also overflows, now and then, into hopeless gloom. Theo Boettger takes advantage of only a fraction of the potential of the medium in his watercolours, but he does so intentionally, reducing his works to a few primary tones without any decorative smears or flowing colour gradients.

Simplicity of form is the goal; formal disquietude corresponds to an authentic sense of agitation. The remnants of the artist's presence in the paintings—moist waves and blemishes, drips of paint, black blots—attest to the intensity of the process of creation and appear as marks of desecration on the once-white paper. There is more than formal coquetry with brutishness, fury, and rebelliousness resonating in these paintings. Indeed, the interspersed words outline the path of a diffuse, cognitive march; yet they remain mere intimations that never run the risk of congealing into slogans. Like echoes, these words refer back to the fragmentary nature of modern worlds of signs.

Artistic examinations of acute situations in society by means of street observations have a rich historical tradition. The high point of this tradition was, arguably, the urban painting of Expressionism and Critical Realism in the 1920s, which often derived the arc of tension in their narratives by juxtaposing the rich and the poor, the seemingly limitless possibilities for amusement in the city and the melancholy of the individual in the crowd. It is possible to draw a direct comparison between Theo Boettger's paintings and these traditions. Nevertheless, these works are missing the 'lighter side' almost completely, as if one had taken down all of the radiant facades of the city, leaving behind only the featureless quagmire of humanity in its bowels. The artist turns his attention to the darkened realms, the splatter scene that is everyday existence. Yet he does not do so with meticulous descriptions and objective statistics. Rather, he uses images to speak the language of what he represents. Boettger is gruff and sarcastic, but never distant.

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