

Jan Brokof

Jan Brokof follows his own artistic paths. At the same time, he knows that art cannot draw inspiration only from life, inner emotions, or outside experiences, but must also always refer to itself and develop from an *imitatio artis*. This means that exploring older works of art or questioning one's own artistic, material, and technical prerequisites always play a significant role in the development of new art. In this tug of war between creating something new and free of preconditions and reflecting the past, Jan Brokof has found his own original approach.

Brokof has a preference for artworks on and with paper and for combining these with other artistic materials. Since his studies at the Dresden University of Visual Arts, Brokof has focused in particular on woodcutting, black-ink painting, and graphite and coloured pencil drawings. His works are thus rooted in tradition. He records things he has seen, thought, or felt in a small sketchbook, which serves as a rich source of motifs and inspiration for later use. It is upon these that his – one could almost say classical – small and larger-format works on paper are based. But in the way he handles the medium of woodcutting, in particular, Brokof makes clear that his understanding of the graphic arts goes far beyond what is traditionally associated with the term. Indeed, he uses this printing method to create *novel* three-dimensional, room-sized sculptural contexts, installing large-scale paper collages and building reliefs and objects whose massive cores are covered with woodcuts.

To date, Brokof has dealt in his works primarily with memories of his youth in the industrial city of Schwedt and impressions from his day-to-day life. These include recollections of the grey and dismal-looking tower blocks and industrial plants of his hometown, of his childhood bedroom with its window views of an anonymous urban landscape, and of direct personal experiences. Everything around him is of interest and can provide material for his art: a glance at his girlfriend, his acquaintances and friends, his worktable, his favourite music group, poster ads, the old woman going shopping. Time and again, Brokof focuses in his works on everyday activities like taking a bath or hanging out with friends in the evening or late into the night. Important, too, are very private experiences, such as headaches that accompany changes in weather, or sexual feelings and stimulation.

Brokof's visualised fragments of experience, his creative notations of feelings, are frequently executed in graphite or coloured pencil and using an associative pictorial language that is sometimes reminiscent of caricature in its exaggeration and can appear unfamiliar in its surrealism. *Sex Pistols*, for instance, employs humour and allusions to the principle of comic strips to relate a very personal story, although it remains unclear whether the artist actually experienced what is told. Images of campsites, trips to pop concerts, and compulsory military service come to mind. During these narrative episodes, sexual

innuendos become particularly apparent in Brokof's work, such as when the branches in a dense row of trees behind a tent reveal themselves to be erect penises, or in dreamlike scenes showing a group of hills with a vagina-like entrance inhabited by a phallic form that also resembles a pin cushion or a cactus.

In their artistic design, these drawings are also more complex than the black-ink paintings that Brokof has completed to date. The characteristic lines of the pencils used by the artist are considerably more variable. Brokof employs stippling, hatching, and line-and-wash techniques, proving himself to a graphic artist and colourist of exceptional subtlety – a characteristic he has eschewed thus far in his ink paintings and woodcuts.

Alongside these works so full of innuendos and sometimes difficult to decipher are drawings, ink paintings, and woodcuts that explore architectural forms, houses, and building complexes. Here, programmatic questions appear to play a more significant role and reveal the fundamental design principles in Brokof's oeuvre.

In his ink paintings, Brokof works above all with the succinct contrast between black and white. Broad black strokes, solid black areas, and an intermediate gray tone of thinned black ink to indicate shadows are employed in an almost primitivist manner. In turn, the white of the paper ground often serves as an effective contrast.

A hallmark of Brokof's ink paintings is their serial quality and the way they play with different visual realities. Brokof employs an entire repertoire of building forms, much like movable pieces of scenery. Some of these works show succinct, two-dimensional views of buildings, their windows appearing as tall rectangles of casually unpainted blank white space. At times, the areas on one side are more compressed than on the others, creating an optical illusion that makes the viewer automatically attempt to discern a shortening of perspective. Skylines filled with high-rise buildings in every shape and form are also frequent themes in these works. These show completely different ways of realistic depiction and starkly varied visual states of aggregation, ranging from comparatively precise and subtle representations to simple grids with dabs of ink. Sometimes we see a pattern that looks as if it had been formed by a perforated metal plate placed awkwardly on the sheet of paper, but which is undoubtedly a variation of the high-rise motif. In other cases, different high-rise buildings are layered on top of one another like the scenery in a theatre, or they are designed as three-dimensional, sculpture-like cubes attached to the paper itself. And yet other works show high-rises that look as if they, pushed back into the depths of the picture, were standing in a wasteland of cement with the black streaks of streets converging upon them.

A frequently recurring building type in this group of works is the 'pyramid house' – a small cube-shaped structure, often with only one window on each side and with a steep pyramid-shaped roof. Sometimes these buildings are shown standing by themselves or in a row like bathing cabins behind a paling fence; others are painted from a bird's-eye view and,

with their extreme contrasts of light and dark, look as if they had been drenched in the bright artificial light of a film studio. In fact, the light in many of Brokof's ink paintings has a similarly artificial quality to it.

Other works show only a simple diamond-shaped pattern that evokes the bathing cabins – very much as if we were looking down at their roofs from above during the night. In several paintings, Brokof plays with the contrast between finely detailed window façades and diffuse and blotchy patterns, endowing the works with a surprisingly informal, almost abstract and expressive air.

Overall, it is the geometry of repeated motifs and the play with different modes of *expression* that dominate in these works. Grids and lattices transition seamlessly into window façades and then back again into ornamental patterns, allowing the message conveyed by the pictures to oscillate between mimesis and abstract symbolism.

Atmosphere plays a relatively straightforward role in these works and arises through the use of a simple black background that gives the impression of a night-time scene or simple bright backgrounds that are suggestive of daylight. Sometimes Brokof modifies these almost overly simple atmospheres by adding clouds, which look like black smoke billowing from factory chimneys and convey a sense of foreboding. Looking at this group of works as a whole reveals that many of them have a muted, almost melancholy quality.

In some of his works, Brokof not only varies his motifs and oscillates, in terms of content, between symbolism and realism. He also employs fragmentation and a layering of visual themes. The latter technique is similar to the effect produced by opening multiple files on a computer and is typical of a visual world that shows evidence of a confrontation with today's new media. However, at the same time, Brokof consciously opposes a stylised visual language. If we compare his artistic approach and his treatment of visual materials to those of other artists of his generation, we can see that he avoids any creative path that might lead to cyberspace-like spatial constructs, based as these are in the visual language of many computer games.

Instead, Brokof's drawings, ink paintings, and, above all, his woodcuts are characterised by something conspicuously naive, craftsman-like, and simple, which underscores the expressive qualities inherent in the materials he uses. Although Brokof is clearly not interested in any particular kind of sophistication, it could be asserted that it is precisely his avoidance of sophistication that endows his works with refinement and subtlety. The artist strives to maintain a childlike directness in his art, calling to mind the *Art Brut* of Jean Dubuffet. By consistently relying on his own spontaneity, Brokof provides an argument against slick virtuosity and elegantly ossified attitudes towards style. He performs a balancing act, alternating between calculated expectations and a spontaneous openness to meaning – one important reason why his works have an anti-academic quality to them.

Often Brokof's ink paintings are executed *almost* casually – the contours are unsteady, the ink inexactly mixed – as if they had been churned out quickly and without any stylistic intention. Stray splatterings of paint and clear traces of the working process ensure that the viewer remains aware of how these works were produced. And with regard to the woodcuts, it is unlikely that a professional printer would approve of the way they have been printed. But Brokof's chief interest is not to print pure, even colours by using cleanly inked blocks, but rather to create an expressive and impulsive effect. Often we can see the grain of the wood used for printing – an effect first introduced to the art of woodcutting by Edvard Munch. And like Munch's woodcuts, Brokof's works are clearly self-referential: they not only depict something, but also thematise the technique upon which they are based.

By using age-old techniques such as ink painting and woodcutting, Brokof consciously distances himself from the mass culture of the present day, including the slick design of computer-generated art. In today's art world, this adds an anarchistic aspect to his work.

Brokof first gained attention with his thesis project, a more than 5-metre high and 4.5-metre wide woodcut tableau. It shows a front view of an East German tower-block and functions as an unframed wall object. Brokof himself refers to this creation, comprised as it is of numerous individually printed sheets, as well as to the recent, similarly structured works, as 'installations', thus expressing his intention to introduce a new dimension of form and meaning to the art of woodcutting. This tower-block façade is part of a long-term project entitled *P2*, which refers to a specific type of prefabricated building *in East Germany*. In an essay on the artist, his background, and his approach, Susanne Altmann explains that the modules of the building in this major work correspond to the individual segments of the woodcut.¹ Interestingly, the parts that show individual motifs were printed first – in particular, areas showing stereotypical indications of personal elements such as curtains or flowerpots. Subsequently, the artist cut out these sections from the wooden plate – a type of 'lost form' technique – and printed the uniform surfaces of the walls using the same block of wood.

Works like *Wohnhaus mit Fabrik* ('Tower Block With Factory', 2005) or the wide-format woodcut mounted on MDF *Engelsstraße 19-29* ('19-29 Engels Street', 2005) are also part of this context. Brokof's most elaborate woodcut/installation to date is his *Jugendzimmer* ('Childhood Bedroom', 2005). Here, the wooden walls, the bed, the wall cupboard and bookcase, and even the plant pot, cassette recorder, and the cassettes themselves have been made from wood boards covered with woodcuts, creating a three-dimensional, walk-in room installation 2.62 x 3.10 x 3.68 metres in size. The woodcuts provide the neutral and bare room with its own identity and tell the story of a childhood that is representative of that experienced by many people *in the Eastern Bloc countries*. The overall impression is one of

¹ Susanne Altmann, Jan Brokof, *Jan Brokof, Marion Ermer Preis 2005*, exhibition catalogue (Dresden: Marion Ermer Stiftung zur Förderung von Kunst und Kultur in Sachsen und Thüringen, 2005), pp. 6-9.

profound melancholy. We discern the printed spines of the books, the large flower patterns on the bedspread, and the posters on the wall. And through the two-part window, we can see a backdrop of high-rise buildings, which are also represented by means of a woodcut.

For Brokof, woodcutting has become a medium that goes far beyond the two-dimensional artistic product. He sees woodcuts as the embodiment of image laboratories, which he assembles into sculptural test facilities according to the modular principle of design. Brokof has developed nothing less than a system based on components such as small woodcut sheets, planimetric objects, layered two-dimensional, and fully three-dimensional bodies. A major work in this context is *Prachtstraße [Boulevard]*, which alludes to the wide socialist boulevards in the former Eastern Bloc countries and shows a U-shaped high-rise complex traversed by a street depicted in perspective.

In this work we also encounter another of the artist's design principles, which also applies, in different way, to his black-ink paintings: the play with proportions and the alternation between close-up and distant views. If we only see a photo of the object *Prachtstraße*, for example, we cannot tell whether it is a very small or a very large work. The change of perspectives and the varying distance of the viewer to the object are important to Brokof. He thus employs exaggerated foreshortening, like that used in *Prachtstraße*, to draw the viewer even more effectively into the depths of the image. By evoking this illusion of depth, Brokof alludes playfully to the backdrops of the Renaissance stage, in which extreme foreshortening was used to create the impression of rooms that extended much farther back than the actual depth of the stage. In his ink paintings, the artist alternates between extremely long-distance views and page-filling panoramas, only in his next work literally to zoom in on *minute* details.

Time and again, it becomes clear that Brokof intends to thwart the viewer's visual expectations in his installations. Although the link to reality is always present, it is often blurred and emptied of meaning. Looking, for example, at the works of Thomas Demand, who takes the opposite approach, makes this principle easier to understand. Demand creates perfect reproductions of rooms and locations and then photographs them, making it difficult for the viewer to distinguish between illusion and reality. Only upon closer inspection do we recognise that what we thought was real is actually a skilful reproduction. In contrast, Brokof makes the artificiality of his representations clear from the very start, thus imbuing them with an almost symbolic quality.

This 'mediated' understanding of reality becomes easier to comprehend if we compare Brokof's three-dimensional objects and installations with the works, for example, of the Polish artist Robert Kusmirowski, born in 1974. Kusmirowski's reconstructions transport the viewer into nostalgic and, at the same time, anachronistic visual worlds. Kusmirowski's objects, all of which look more or less authentic, ultimately undermine the myth of the

readymade, which was introduced in the early twentieth century by Marcel Duchamp and later continued by Andy Warhol. Kusmirowski creates his works out of cheap materials and subjects them to an artificial aging process – a patination marked by an obsession with details. In this manner, he creates prints, documents, objects, spaces, and complex actions, that refer to historical events or places and transfer the issues related to them into the present day – very much like Brokof when he alludes to his own biography and examines whether an event from long ago is still relevant to the here and now.

But whereas Kusmirowski's works can be confused with reality, no one would ever entertain the idea that Brokof's installations were actual spaces or rooms. There is no quality of authenticity to Brokof's works. Instead, they function like scenes on a stage: looking at them helps us recall the reality of the past. Brokof translates the act of remembering into an art form in which the past is always clearly the past. He achieves this, for example, through the dominance of the printing technique, which is designed to cause a constant sense of alienation when looking at his works. The view from the window of his *Childhood Bedroom* is a good example, for it is clearly meant to be recognised as a woodcut that has been glued onto the wall. The same can be said of the three-dimensional high-rise cubes, which are reminiscent of enormous toys from a long-lost childhood spent dreaming of building real things. The woodcuts in these installations are like graphic reproduction metaphors for things that are potentially buildable. Nevertheless, they could never be confused with scale models of tower blocks.

Although Brokof's treatment of woodcutting as a medium is unusual today, his technique and his formats hark back to the late Middle Ages and the Renaissance. Indeed, in his own unique way, Brokof is continuing the development of the genre, which in Germany can be traced through to the artists of the Dresdner Brücke and then on to Georg Baselitz, Matthias Mansen, or A.R. Penck.

Of the classical printmaking methods, the woodcut technique is the oldest. In Central Europe, the earliest extant woodcuts can be dated back to approximately 1400 *AD*. At the time, a special form of woodcut called the broadsheet was developed. These were individual sheets of paper printed on one-side; most of the images were religious in nature, but secular motifs, such as those for playing cards, were by no means unheard of. The earliest woodcuts were plain and simple – a particularly revealing fact in the context of Jan Brokof's work. Their almost primitive form ensured that the printed motifs were easily intelligible. Today, their awkwardness comes across as refreshing and new. We can clearly see that we are looking at what was then a revolutionary new medium whose expressive possibilities were still being explored. Alongside letterpress printing, these woodcuts were among the earliest forms of mass communication and were directed at a broader public that had little money to spend on works of art. Interestingly, people at the time also pinned these woodcuts on their walls or

glued them onto the tops of small boxes and inside caskets. And with regard to Brokof, whose works give the impression that the artist is not particularly interested in developing his own polished, personal style, it should be remembered that woodcuts from the late Middle Ages draw their strength from their anonymity.

The sometimes enormous formats used by Brokof are reminiscent of the enormous woodcuts of the Italian Renaissance, such as Jacopo da Barbari's bird's-eye view of Venice (1500) or *Submersion of the Pharaoh* (1549) designed by Titian and carved by Domenico delle Greche on behalf of the Venetian artist.

An even more pertinent example is Albrecht Dürer. With his woodcut series *Apocalypse* from 1498, he was not only the first person to bring woodcutting into the realm of high art. He also revolutionised the possibilities of the medium with his work, beginning in 1512, on two grandiose woodcut projects commissioned by Holy Roman Emperor Maximilian I: the *Triumphal Arch*, a 3.5-meter wide triumphal arch on paper consisting of 192 woodblocks and the *Triumphs of Maximilian*, which has 147 sequential woodcuts that add up to almost fifty-seven metres. Like Dürer, Brokof navigates the fine line between representing content and formulating an architectural utopia.

Moreover, with the consciously unrefined and striking manner in which he uses his artistic tools and materials, Brokof clearly continues a late-nineteenth-century development that, for some time, was considered a hallmark of modern art. The expressionists, for example, were keen on distinguishing their works from the slick visual reproductions typical of photography – a genre that claimed the realm of objective documentation for itself. As a result, they preferred roughly carved blocks that called attention to the woodcutting process. Brokof's personal style in this regard is also very pronounced.

Added to this is the fact that Brokof regards graphic prints as a rare artistic products rather than mass-produced goods like those of Friedensreich Hundertwasser or Joan Miró, to name two extreme examples. In contrast, Brokof's woodcuts are one-of-a-kind or limited edition pieces. It is almost as if their rarity increased their value, and although they appear lacking in sophistication, they are by no means a social, easily consumed medium along the lines of 'art for all'. Brokof's works are unwieldy and require that their audience be receptive and willing to examine them in detail.

In working with the medium of paper, Jan Brokof has discovered a new and untrodden path, but is unafraid to admit that he using it to cross familiar terrain. Indeed, it is precisely his play with this knowledge that opens up entirely new dimensions in the field of graphic arts.

Wolfgang Holler, in April 2007

