

Sugar-coated Memory

The world of images in the works of Stefanie Busch is black and white. A strict lack of colour, as a formal principle, is the foundation of her art. The decision to forgo the use of colour represents a particular conceptual and artistic challenge—and one with which the graphic arts have been familiar for many centuries. The texture of the image emerges only from the sketch, from filling in or leaving blank sections of the background, as a result of which even the empty areas can become vivid. The colouring within the interplay of light and shadows is simulated by innumerable shades of gray between the poles of black and white.

Stefanie Busch's preferred medium is the silk-screen print, the master images for which are comprised of handmade paper cuttings. In this regard, Busch's works can be seen as standing firmly in the tradition of the graphic arts. Nevertheless, her language of images is influenced profoundly by photography and film. Indeed, photographs serve as the basis for all of her works. For the most part, Busch's motifs cannot be attributed to any particular place or time, even when they involve a concrete object, a specific place, or a personal experience. The mountain landscapes, forests, lakes, suburb streets, and flocks of birds are not treated in an aesthetic fashion, nor are they requisites for emotional images of longing. Rather, they represent the raw material for analysing the ambivalence of memories. Looking at Busch's representations, we often feel that we have seen them before, as they appear to be part of a collective memory of pictures. This tendency to achieve a visual consensus, already seen in Busch's choice of motifs, is reinforced by the austerity of black, gray, and white tones. In their detached silence, the landscapes and streets in Busch's works are shifted away from the present day, simultaneously evoking the same emotional valuations with which all memories are imbued.

And yet, as we all know, memories can be deceptive. Never static, they are reshaped during the act of remembrance, subject to psychologically stimulated manipulation—whether we are conscious of this or not. Indeed, it is not uncommon for memories to turn out to be projections. And it is precisely this ambivalence that Stefanie Busch investigates in her art. She expresses her doubts about the reliability of remembered images by giving her works titles such as *Erinnerung geschönt* [*Sugar-coated*

Memory], *Panik* [*Panic*], or *High Noon* that firmly refute appearances. However, this juxtaposition of reality and appearance is more than just a nominal one. It also takes place, very subtly, in the pictures themselves. The landscape we think we have already seen somewhere turns out to be a topographical collage that plays with our notions of the idyllic; snow-covered mountains are reflected, absurdly, in the windows of an urban apartment building; on a high mountain plateau, we encounter a young woman in light, everyday apparel.

The ostensible plausibility inherent to these images stems from their physical presence. For a number of years now, Busch has used light boxes to showcase the transparencies she has created by means of the silk-screen technique. The light endows the images, in their black and white austerity, with a certain brilliance, suggesting at the same time three-dimensional space. Nevertheless, the immaculate, almost photographic surface of the works reveals itself upon second glance to be no more than an attractive illusion, behind which a handmade, formal structure is hidden. In an elaborate process comparable to the progressive cutting of the same block in woodcut printing, the artist cuts her motifs from the transparencies in a number of different stages, assembling them layer by layer during the printing process. At the beginning there is the emptiness of the white surface, followed by the darkness of black as it emerges from the many superimposed tones of gray. The rough cuts made by the scissors can still be seen in the final product, intimating the fragile status of retrospection.

In the sediment of our memory, images are constantly layered upon other images. The limited capacity of our minds to store all of these is, in itself, enough to lead to many and diverse transformations. The new is superimposed on the old, the unimportant is forgotten, the beautiful is always remembered, the unpleasant is repressed, the complicated is simplified. Nevertheless, we still believe our memories and the images contained within them—even if they, similar to the works of Stefanie Busch, are, at best, always true and untrue at the same time.

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