

Malice in Wonderland

The little girls' big eyes in the lovely dolls' faces look apathetically into the void. Their surroundings, that at first sight look so idyllic, are transformed. After perhaps just for a split second fooling us into believing that this is the visualisation of our dream of happiness in the secure fairy-tale universe of childhood, it changes its character completely into something gruesome and threatening. What is this?

Julie Nord (b. 1970) trained in the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts and is a leading representative of the recent wave of figurative narrative pictorial art. Among her fundamental inspirations are the story and illustrations in Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* from 1865, but over recent years she has worked further on the basis of a series of other sources of inspiration such as Gothic stories and archetypes of the fantasy and horror genre.

Breaking the Pattern

It can be difficult to work out what her drawings represent, for like puzzle pictures in which, in the same motif, the eye sees first one then another of a series of alternative shapes and meanings, this dualism confuses us. The lace-fine fibre pen drawings show a host of details where bouquets of flowers encompass skulls, butterflies are apparently transformed into bats and the countless metamorphoses both fascinate and frighten us. The rules of perspective are both respected and ignored in the elegant play with the illusionistic pictorial space, while the displaced spatial constructions are woven into each other. The unreality in the compositional elements of the idiom thus contradicts the immediate realism of the style, in which the insistent lines demand presence. The decoration of the intertwining, filigree-like lines, the fused and most often monochrome complexity of the forms are reminiscent of both tattoos and the ornamentations of an earlier age. The patterns can resemble ancient wall coverings or something from a Disney cartoon and they can easily be inspired by something as banal as the terrazzo floor in the bathroom or a coffee stain. The ornamentation is interrupted by empty areas of white to which the viewer's thoughts inevitably return: What is missing? Can we make up for it ourselves? Are Nord's lines to be viewed as illuminating reality, that is to say a portrait as

in old miniatures or medals, but where an image of some person is missing, or are the blank areas bubbles as in a strip cartoon?

A Psychedelically Dualistic World of Motifs

The many symbols compete for dominance of the impression, and the iconography is almost psychedelically dualistic. Elements from widely different spheres of meaning are combined: the unreality of the fairy-tale world for instance in the lovely children's innocent presentation of themselves as princesses and "Gothic" castles encircled by hawthorns; the quite modern everyday houses and familiar genres from the history of art collide in the duel between the flowering meadows of the Arcadian pastoral and a barren, war-ravaged countryside. At the same time we glimpse the landscapes of Romanticism with their soulful metaphors for human feelings and events. Connotations with kitsch and cliché, strip cartoons and the horror of the fantasy world are mixed with elements from "finer" art history such as bouquets of flowers. They consist of the flowers of life, the seed capsules of the opium poppy and skulls (which are sometimes sticking out their tongues at the viewer), and are ambiguous in themselves: Vanitas bouquets of this kind are especially familiar from the allegorical still lifes of the 17th century, which side by side with an invitation to enjoy the delights that life offers also contain a memento mori to remind the viewer of the transience of the senses and enjoyment – the ephemerality of life. Innocence and the joy in life are accompanied by death here as everywhere in the images; good and evil exist not only side by side; they are intertwined in each other and impossible to separate. The bouquets could also be macabre and bizarre bridal bouquets with echoes of the girls' romantic dreams of the prince on the white horse; he ought to save them at the end of the fairy tale, but he will hardly do so. The symbols are characteristically repeated in Nord's oeuvre in which for instance bats with their overtones of dark powers, and beacons as expressions of a kind of human consciousness of existence, are combined with piles of excrement and wrapped up in female aesthetic delights.

Eyes and Looks

The eye motif along with eye and sign metaphors is repeated everywhere. The viewer has a feeling of being observed; whether it is the anxious people hiding in the houses, the many animals or the buildings that in some strange way can see, is impossible to decide. Perhaps because in some paranoid fashion we are controlled by the works' symbols of the modern surveillance society, the many aeriels and helicopters? The girls'

lifeless skewed glances are often paralleled by our ability, as observers, to experience direct eye contact with other creatures in the drawings, for instance armadillos. Do the many formal ovals represent eyes? The blind eyes in the pictures, around which everything revolve; a transit place in which sinister, unnameable transformations take place? Eyes are seen as the mirrors of the soul. What kind of soul or lack of such is reflected here?

Rorschach Test

Beneath the straightforward surface, Nord tells about fierce confrontations between the conscious and the unconscious or the dream state; and between reality and illusion. The viewer is unable to retain both impressions at the same time, and as in a Rorschach test our associations and the deeper features of our characters are revealed. It says something about us if we see the sweet or the brutal in the image; a predictable sense of security or a restlessness provoked by angst; a child's universe or a grown-up's. Life or death. For we cannot avoid being drawn into this complex world with its surreal narrativity. If nothing else, then via the details of the everyday motifs that we all know from our own lives. They take us into the drawings and directly to the privet hedges surrounding the houses of the average Dane. Here, too, a dual morality persists. Here, the unconscious and the alien break through the fragile outer appearance of familiar idyll, like rabbits emerging from their holes, and our carefully created rationalistic world is threatened by the unknown and the dangerous. The dualistic is not strictly divided into poles, but it is mixed in a disquieting fashion, and the immediate ongoing story is shot through and broken down into something grotesque.

Drawing

Nord's choice of medium itself breaks with the traditional pattern. Historically speaking, drawing has primarily been considered a lesser medium for making sketches, but after decades of experiments with light, network and installation art, the technique of drawing is here enjoying a minor renaissance. Nord, whose previous work has included video installations, has said that to her drawing is an easier, faster and freer manner of working, and that it is more closely linked to her ideas. When exhibited, these works do not always present themselves behind glass and in frames, but can equally well be drawn directly on the wall. This can be seen as a comment on the old discussion about the idea of a work, the question of genuine as opposed to reproductions well as the general creation of representation and significance by images and also the ontological status of art. The drawings are closely related to the time and space of the exhibition. The technique thus

underlines the contents of the work; these humorous and cruel fairy tales in pictures for adults are also by virtue of the medium characterised by duality and linked to the present age, where the Alice in Wonderland transformations are perhaps more relevant than ever.

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In our post-modern fragmented age, in which the great stories have gone and single individuals must apparently constantly construct new identities in order to feel they exist and to avoid emptiness, urgent images such as these compel us to stop and philosophise not only over our own fragile inferior existences, but also over art and its oncology. There are no easy answers here, but many difficult questions. Back to the empty spaces in the drawings: We must ourselves fill in the voids in our own lives, but with what? This "existential snapshot", as Nord herself puts it, destabilises our world picture. So-called objective reality is dissolved and revealed to be a mental construct. Reality is transformed into illusion; illusion into reality. Nothing is what it pretends to be. Evil becomes good; good becomes evil. There was a time when good and evil, life and death, were clearly distinct, and when stories such as Alice in Wonderland came to a happy conclusion. But even those things that appeared to be dreamt, fantastic transformations have like a lost fairy tale been transformed into everyday reality:

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