

Bodies in View: The Paintings of Sibylle Springer

As an artist, Sibylle Springer's fascination is with the human body, or more precisely, with how the body is entangled with the gaze that is directed towards it and addressed to it. Her painting contemplates, unfolds and interprets this tense reciprocal relationship, which is fundamentally a self-relation, always already inscribed with an internal structure of reflection, saturated in cultural history. Among other things, this means that despite the often direct and strongly affective impact of body-images, nothing about them is without preconditions and predeterminations. Innocent nakedness is just as much a construction as erotic sophistication. Whether artistic nude, pornography or biological objectivity, ethnologically other or historically estranged, ugly or beautiful, none of them are inherently 'natural', 'obscene', 'objective' or 'revolting'.

In this much, Springer's aesthetic project is at heart always a reflection on the gaze: from this standpoint, it goes on to reflect on painting, and its styles, visual traditions and subject matters. Consequently, Springer operates from the outset within a field of representation(s). She does not, thus, create her own

particular portraits or nudes, like an Eric Fischl or a Lucian Freud, each of whom develop(ed) a characteristic gaze on the body. Instead, Springer re-presents her painting: in other words, she consistently refers to existing paintings and visual works. This certainly shares the discursive traits of "Appropriation Art", in as much as it stands, per se, with one foot outside the contents of the image. It does so in order to turn the gaze towards the constitutive conditions of art in general and of the particular work in question, while absorbing this perspectival position into itself. A reflexive move is made here: first out of the image, then back into the image. Thus, it constructs a gaze on the gaze, achieved within the work itself. This step is also characteristic of Springer's approach. However, as a restaging, Springer's way of appropriation goes beyond this: her work appropriates in a thoroughly painterly way. Here, the original work is not merely contextualized and displayed with modified signifiers – as Richard Prince did with the Marlboro cowboy or Elaine Sturtevant with Duchamp's readymades and Warhol's paintings. In Springer's work, an original painting is chosen after long and careful research, and is then transformed through painting. It is not merely 'repeated', but newly invented, so to speak, through her distinctive painting process: it is formally dissolved and reconstructed as something quite new.

Typical of this is her painting's strong focus on surfaces: At times, the real subjects of her images are highly concealed. At first glance, Springer's works can often appear to be monochrome informel paintings, usually with pale or shining silver surfaces, but sometimes profoundly dark. For the viewer, the reworked subject matter only slowly coheres into a whole. For the most part, it demands concentrated, conscious viewing to bring the represented subject back 'into focus'. In this way, Springer deliberately produces a challenge for the eye, both requiring and addressing a certain voyeurism, inherent to the pictorial in general, but also to the aspect of 'exhibiting'. In terms of the human body, more specific themes emerge: the erotic, for example, but also the voyeuristic curiosity in cruelty, violence and horror. The painting of Cecily Brown offers a broadly comparable game, a puzzle-play with the voyeuristic gaze and desire's concealment on the visual surface of the painting. Brown paints scenes taken from pornographic images: her flesh-coloured, Fauvist gestures simultaneously revealing and concealing the dramatic nude. But while Brown works with gesture in quasi-disruptive fashion, Springer opens up (and hides) her subjects – which also have broader cultural-historical scope – on surfaces made from a homogeneous range of colours.

Play with the voyeuristic gaze is already a feature of almost all the works Springer makes reference to. One direct example is *La Gimblette (ou la femme qui pisse)* (2016), a large-format adaptation of a

motif from the eponymous pair of works by French Rococo painter Francois Boucher (1703–1770). Two scenes are juxtaposed in Boucher's small oval paintings of 1742: an innocent, playful scene in which an elegant woman trains a 'docile dog' (the painting's subtitle) with a biscuit, and a second image, coarse and drastic, with the same woman lifting her skirts to urinate into a bowl she holds beneath her. In the background, barely visible, a curious spectator gazes through a window at the events of the image. Springer's painting focuses on the latter motif. Her *La Gimblette* is a scene from bawdy salon painting, encompassing its particular thematic play: the tension between showing and hiding, taboo and its overcoming which Springer turns into a quite specific experience of seeing. First of all she converts the original small scene into a much larger format of 210 Å 170 cm, turning Boucher's figure from a miniature to a lifesize figure. Even more decisive is how she almost entirely conceals the representation, dissolving it into a broken monochrome flatness. At first glance, the picture appears to have been immersed in silver-grey: it is irregular and flickering, but nonetheless presents a flat and coherent pictorial space, streaked in places with cloudy patches of colour, pale pink and dark grey, and more sparingly violet and green. Springer painted the subject so that it almost – but not quite – disappears. So for example, the floral frills of the lavish Rococo dress are not rendered with the original's clear palette, but in weakly contrasting tones of pale silver grey. At first, the image seems non-representational, an amorphous flickering and glimmering, an effect, incidentally, quite capable of flirting with the Rococo elegance of the original. But precisely because it withdraws from the gaze, the subject matter appeals all the more strongly to the curious, searching gaze. Initially confronted with abstraction, this gaze perhaps at first makes out a foot, then a window frame. It goes on, becoming gradually more precise, to unveil the entire intimate scene, and suddenly finding oneself in a voyeuristic perspective. Thus, Springer's painting stages its own seduction of looking.

This is what Springer's intensification of older paintings is all about: creating ambivalences and then visually navigating within them. The exhibition gift presented a comprehensive collection of images which clearly reveal the extent of her knowledge of pictures – this historical, thematic and generic range is implicitly contained in both her research and her work: a wall installation, untitled since Springer does not regard it as an autonomous work (she speaks of 'the wall of my studio') is a lively illustration of the visual space of reflection in which her work is created and which serves as its context. In fact, the compilation collected in 2016 and 2017 – the exhibition presented postcards, newspaper clippings, found illustrations, printed pictures, etc. – is a consistent element of her daily working life. It has been transferred to the concluding area of the exhibition space, arranged into a kind of analogue cloud: 500 or more of these small-format images formed a dense structure here, at least 4 meters wide and as high as the ceiling. Springer said that since this working material, so important to her, has been in the exhibition and thus unavailable, a new set of pinboards has grown in her studio. Her painting is clearly based on a lively reflection about those images.

The collection exhibited here features famous art-historical subjects, among them Goya's *Nude Maja* (1795–1800), Parmigianino's *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* (1523) and the highly erotic subject, so often depicted, of *Leda and the Swan*, as well as little-known pictures. Advertising photography is also included, as well as traditional Japanese and other erotica, Renaissance portraits, comics, and motifs from the work of Robert Mapplethorpe, all mixed in with abstruse, obscene or magnificently silly material found online. Conversely, we also see another kind of body-image, unsettling in a different way, for example old woodcuts showing torture scenes, carrying strange echoes of images of contemporary S&M practices. All of this is present in reproductions of photographs, paintings and prints. With fascinating variety, the collection encompasses images and stagings of the body, which emerged in diverse media and several centuries. Springer has organized this arrangement associatively, rather than chronologically or by style. In this way, surprising visual bridges often open up among the body-images, crossing epochs and styles, for example when the reproduction of Boucher's *La femme qui pisse* is surrounded by extremely heterogeneous urination images. In this way, the entire structure

functions associatively – one jumps from image to image, creating connections. It is possible to genuinely lose oneself in the breadth of the spectrum, and certainly to have fun. Above all, one directly experiences the visual curiosity thematised by Springer's painting.

The gaze and voyeuristic curiosity also play key roles in the large-format painting *Dschungel* (Jungle, 2017). The picture at first seems to be a silver-coloured and (depending on the light) reflective surface which seems to bounce off the gaze. Even at this point the picture's enormous wealth of detail is visible, but at first glance, its figuration is concealed by its shimmering, homogenous colours and emphatically flat application of paint, insomuch that represented figures and events can barely be made out. Only gradually does a constellation of figures emerge from this abstract set of elements: in a forest clearing, we see a woman on a swing, which a man on the right-hand side of the picture keeps in motion with a rope. Less apparent is a man recumbent in the bushes to the left of the picture. This is an adaptation of *The Swing* (1767–1768), a major work by Jean-Honor. Fragonard (1732–1806), Boucher's (younger) contemporary and without question a central figure in Rococo painting. This light, vivacious scene overtly plays with an eroticism of the gaze. It is not simply that the couple who do the swinging seem to have an amorous relationship, or that the natural setting, remote from society, serves as a 'locus amoenus', liberating the soul and the senses. In addition to this, the man in the bushes – it is unclear if he is a friend or a hidden observer – is integrated into the structure of gazes. Moreover, he is a voyeur: when he looks at the lady on the swing, who at the apex of her trajectory is even at the point of losing a shoe, he can see directly under her elaborate crinoline skirts.

As well as Fragonard's light and airy style, especially present in his representations of nature, this art-historically relevant scene is above all of interest to Springer because of its visual architecture of desire. As a painting, Springer's work adapts this in a particularly ingenious way: directly on the surface of the painting, the complexity, and even the voluptuousness, of the fibral motif merges with its disappearance. Concealment and revelation all but converge. In this way, conscious vision is triggered as a literal 'sharpening' of the viewer's gaze, linking the moment of voyeurism to the picture, which also thematises it.

In these genuine painterly interventions and interpretations, Springer addresses a theme inherent to the reference images she has chosen: the gaze upon the body. The small portrait *Der Blick* (*The Gaze*, 2015), to name another example, brings this to bear in a direct and surprisingly effective way. In terms of painting, Springer here takes a different approach than in the works described above, allowing the image's subject to unfold out of the dark, thus binding the viewer's gaze into the opacity. The work, painted in black with deep-blue nuances, shows a young man – or perhaps a young woman: the uncertainty begins here – appearing to look at the viewer from out of nothingness. Here, Springer is adapting a portrait by the late-Classical French painter Pierre Paul Prud'hon (1758–1823). Her painterly interpretation reproduces the original in slightly cropped form, zooming in on the face somewhat, thus creating greater and surely more suggestive proximity. But at the same time, the picture is plunged into darkness to such a degree that in looking, the viewer's gaze has, so to speak, to feel its way through a diffuse, view-resisting layer. Having done this, it has the ambivalent sensation that the gaze of the subject, male or female, has been upon them all the time. Looking slightly sideways, the collar pulled high, the hair combed back from the brow, the dark eyes rest coolly on the viewer. So who is the voyeur here, and who is observing whom? This is a picture which lures its viewer into a simple but artful structure of gazes, entangling him / her there. A picture which creates the sudden strange feeling that one is oneself being observed.

Jens Asthoff