Sibylle Springer. The Lies of Painting

It is easy to assume that Sibylle Springer is very skeptical about the general ability of pictures to have an impact and to convey meaning. As a painter, she is always looking for new ways to obscure the references of her pictures or to make them unrecognizable altogether – for example, by applying varnish that only allows us to see the subject when the lighting is just right and when looking at it from the proper angle. Does she perhaps not trust the references she has chosen?

That pictures can lie, and do, has become a commonplace in art criticism. Springer's art is no different, and she continues to serve us up new lies, as we can infer from the title of her exhibition N*eue Lügen* (new lies) shown earlier this year in Bremen. Despite the little white lies we tell every day that make it possible to live with each other in a civilized manner, lying generally has a negative connotation. That painting lies points to the essential fact that even what can seem like the most realistic and realest of pictures cannot be trusted. A picture is always only a representation of reality, after all, and never reality itself. As René Magritte once said, we cannot eat a painted apple, no matter how masterfully it has been rendered. Who wants to disagree with that?

Appearances are deceiving, as the saying goes. We are all exposed to the dangers of fake news and fake pictures, even as we try to filter through the jungle of the millions of pictures available to us to find the truth, or at least a truth. It is no accident that some of Springer's pictures resemble such jungles, occasionally hiding objects, little scenes, and figures in their undergrowth. For it is especially these seemingly chaotic, impenetrable "jungle pictures," like the eponymous work *Pharma Phlora*, that reveal the core of Springer's approach to painting. Not only do they combine abstraction and figuration, they demonstrate the artist's joy of exploring painting's possibilities. They are multilayered in form and content, and they never let their superficial beauty and aesthetics appear positivistic without a deeper level of meaning that sometimes contradicts our first impression. What these pictures therefore aim to reveal is the ambivalence inherent in the world, and in art.

The new series of works shown in Springer's exhibition revolves around poisonous and deadly plants that can also act as cures when administered in small doses. Like other phenomena, these plants have always had more than one side to them; sometimes they conceal their negative and dangerous essence beneath a charming and enchantingly beautiful surface. They share this in common with painting, which has always preferred to cover the most terrible situations and events beneath beautiful and seductive surfaces. When marveling at the Last Judgement so beautifully painted by Michelangelo or Rubens, we are only too glad to look past the gruesome scenes of torture playing out before our very eyes. It is no accident then that Springer has often drawn ideas from the rich reservoir of classical art – for example, from Titian, Bernini, or Hans Baldung Grien. The universally acknowledged value and beauty of these works, combined with their historical distance that removes them from the zeitgeist and hence current personal,

sometimes all too banal and human associations, makes them the ideal surface for all manner of projections regarding reuse and reevaluation.

In *Cocktail*, for example, Springer plays with the two figures from *Death and the Maiden* (c. 1518) by Hans Baldung Grien. Here, living life to the fullest, personified by a woman with a sensuous body, and death, who devours all, are entwined in an embrace. While Baldung Grien relishes emphasizing the contrast between death and the maiden, Springer lets them merge together into an almost black silhouette. The role of the decaying nemesis is thus assumed by the plants – jasmine, henbane, larkspur, ragwort, and ergot kernels –, which result in a toxic cocktail when mixed together. In the end, the resulting new picture only vaguely refers to the old master's original work.

The wordplay of the exhibition title *Pharma Phlora* is also ambiguous. An otherwise innocent and "natural" nature acquires a negative connotation when flora and fauna become a pharmacy and cabinet of poisons for humans and animals alike. As a way of highlighting this ambivalence, several historical vials are also presented in the exhibition, leaving viewers to wonder whether they are filled with poison. However, this question is soon forgotten as we admire the elegant bell jars in which they are bedded on black velvet.

As already mentioned, Springer's pictorial surfaces undergo a delicate, experimental treatment. In addition to the aspect of veiling and hiding, the surface also has a certain component of alchemy, as can be seen, for example, in her use of metals. In *Isn' It?*, a twig that has been applied in silver leaf will oxidize over time and change color. This means that the artwork can no longer be understood as a static, unchangeable product, but more as a mutating organism, parts of which are not under the artist's control. This idea of a mutability generated within the picture itself is also prevalent in a series of portraits in which the heads are overlaid with thin patches of paint that appear to have evolved by chance (if seen only in a single work, this would seem more like a painting accident). While these disturbances do not in any way distort the almost perfect face of the young woman in *thinking circles*, they lend her pensive expression a certain depth by repeating the form of her circular earrings. They thus encourage the beholder to try to fathom the woman's thoughts, her sadness. This almost creates the impression that Springer's pictures develop a life of their own, as if they are eating their way successively through the paint to liberate themselves from the painter's creative intentions.

In *Who's Afraid of Red, Yellow, and Blue?*, three bubbles of primary colors seem to drift, as if by chance, across a portrait of a young man by Botticelli. This sets the stage for a stimulating art historical and philosophical discourse, even if the association with Barnett Newman's famous painting appeared in the title after the fact. Newman wrote in his essay "The Sublime is Now" in 1948 that the sublime is a timeless quality of art. Like Newman, Springer effortlessly spans many centuries by referring to the Renaissance picture; unlike Newman, she draws on references – namely, from European art history. The young man's beauty, which is only temporary in life and is made timeless through painting, is disturbed by Springer's painterly alterations and minimal but decisive deviations from the original. She lets the characteristic elements of the time, like

the hat and shirt, disappear into the dark background, while the young man also no longer looks directly at us, which emphasizes his absentminded expression. In this way, she succeeds in bringing him closer to the present, enabling beholders to empathize with him on another pictorial level through the “thought bubbles.”

In Springer’s picture *who put a spell on her?*, she heightens Maria Magdalena’s ecstatic expression in Artemisia Gentileschi’s painting by detaching the figure from the Biblical narrative and adding the bubble-shaped discolorations. By creating a distance, these estranging effects integrate another pictorial level and let the figure as well as the beholder enter a different space of reality. What is the woman thinking? What is she feeling? What hallucinogenic substances might be involved?

The disparities and ambivalences as well as the mostly subdued colors of these pictures with their blurring and concealing aside, their vivid presence is astonishing. This presence – in other words, how the pictures captivate beholders – reveals a great trust in painting. We know Springer trusts her paintings because she continues to question them. She stays curious about them, keeps looking at them from different perspectives, and continues to allow the possibilities and contingencies of painting to unfold. After all, the language of painting is a wonderful way to explore the world and to engage with past, present, and future. And as to reality, it is on the canvas.

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