

AXILLAE AND THE PRISON BREACK-OUT

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Samuel Imbach is a repeat offender. He repeatedly makes assaults on our own, albeit insufficiently familiar, human body. Although by now Imbach looks back on a painting career of thirty years, he became a repeat offender only during more recent years. Earlier, around 1998/99, he began to paint large abstract paintings that explored the relationship of colors to each other, of brushstroke, surface, and space—all elements essential to good abstract painting, but which were too well behaved and confined to certain limitations and which inhibited his inclination to create offense, not to mention to become a repeat offender.

About ten years ago, paintings suddenly began to evolve that almost seemed to ooze out of the painter's innermost core. They are still abstract, still concerned with color, they are often loud and poppy, and they are still dealing with surface and space, though now, they have spaces that drop off into fathomless depths. In these abysmal, anchorless spaces that seem to fall into the depths, forms seem to be suspended that seem to have an almost orgasmic physicality—flesh-colored skin parts whose curvature form breasts complete with nipples, whose folds recall the female sex, or are they perhaps the sinuous windings of an ear? It is difficult to say—all are orgiastically charged. Stretched out legs appear, drawn back knees reveal dark-colored cavities resembling hairy armpits. The smooth windings, curves, and cavities of Imbach's individual body parts are reminiscent of the amorphous forms of the Surrealist sculptor Jean Arp.

Together with neon-like green stars, glowing glass spheres and shimmering crystals, or brush strokes applied with grand gesture and splodges of color swiftly dabbed onto the canvas, these body parts appropriated from high-gloss magazines and the Internet in a complicated procedure, evolve into large pictures, from which the viewer can hardly abscond. It is this contradiction between the coolness on the one hand with which Imbach arranges the smooth body parts in an almost photorealistic manner on the canvas, and on the other hand, the obsession with which he applies the color around the body parts on the canvas with coarse brush strokes that leave visible traces reminiscent of reliefs. Sometimes he smudges a whole lot of color onto the canvas, which then sticks to its surface in folds like a wet cloth. Occasionally, he covers his paintings with a cobweb-like structure that imparts even further sensuality to the already erotically charged forms—almost like female legs in net stockings stretched out towards the viewer.

And yet, with regard to the body parts, we are confronted with a very clean, almost antiseptic sensuality, which nevertheless does

not detract from the drama. The titles too are dramatic: *Biomorphs on Stage*, *Unfinished Monument Painting*, *Moaning Monument*. The newer series are titled *The Tooth is Loose*, then almost Dadaist *Delete Delete Delete*, and cautiously dramatic *Risque Nude Fragment*.

What makes Imbach's painting unique, are the already mentioned body parts that appear monstrous, and the way he works with these parts. The legs, the arms, the back, the breast, the belly, the armpits emerge isolated from each other, like in a bad dream. In art history we have one example for such treatment of the human body and that is Surrealism, which evolved in Paris in the 1920s. For years frowned upon and disdained by art history, Surrealism has regained greater acceptance by a number of younger artists. Despite not having been thematized by current art theory, a surreal approach has actually been present in contemporary art for quite some time now.

It was Surrealism that shook up the bourgeois consciousness imbued with a modern humanism with and its renounced desires—repressed sexual desire, drives, and violent outbursts: these forces of the uncanny that announce that something deeply alien, uncontrollable, and frightening is dominant within us, as the founder of psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud, wrote in his essay *The Uncanny* in 1919. Disquieting, frightening feelings which express that in the very depth of the human being forces are active, which because they cannot be controlled, the modern, rationally inclined man/woman neither wants to know, nor accept. These forces create angst. They are therefore being repressed not only in the practice of day-to-day living, but also and in particular in theoretical intellectual flights to which thinking is capable in contrast to the grounded body. Not so art. In its long history, it has always been tempted to uncover those forces. We must allow all these uncanny inclinations within us, demanded the eloquent French representative of this art movement, André Breton, in 1924, in the Manifesto of Surrealism.

We have to allow these sexually charged dreams, these violent fantasies and let them flow into art unhindered to let frightening, distressing and in spite of it all wonderful forms of life evolve. "The flora and fauna of Surrealism are monstrous." Simply wonderful, filled with wonder, as the original meaning of this originally Latin word is. The monstrous has always existed—in spite the objections of modern theoreticians. Demons and other monstrosities are to be found in medieval altars and baroque painting and as much as ever in the past, comparable monstrous imagery can also be found in contemporary paintings. Today, such imagery occurs more than ever: Consider the range of nauseating figures in certain photographs by Cindy Sherman, the masturbating madmen in Paul McCarthy's installations, the monstrous figures of Charles Ray, or the picturesque accumulations of mutant bodies in the sculptures of the brothers Jake and Dinos Chapman. All these often breathtaking works are—and we owe this awareness to the Surrealists—deliberate attempts to break out of the neuroses of a subject caught up

in desire, in order to create free space, in which to take new, other paths which, however, can only be escape routes.

Imbach, too, has taken a new path after years of exploring the interior depths of the human body. But it is not entirely new, for he reverted to painting of purely abstract pictures again. The abstract in the series *The Tooth is Loose* of 2009 is not new, but the way it is executed is. It is as though his insight into the abyss of human desire had unleashed forces in him, of which he—if one wants to believe his earlier abstract paintings—had previously been unaware. It is as if an explosion of galactic proportions had occurred within his body, the traces of which he wants to embody in his paintings. But how to achieve this?

With brush strokes that testify to the discharge of frenetic forces, with streams of color that pour across the canvas like a waterfall, with splodges of color that adhere to the bold brush strokes, and with colors that become the source of light. In most pictures the reddish color of flesh dominates. Physicality in its monstrosity characterizes these paintings as well, placing them into close proximity with Francis Bacon on the one hand, and the Surrealist André Masson on the other. Striking are the cobweb-like structures that often cover the picture surface. The Surrealists, too, loved the cobweb as an expression of life-threatening sensuality.

In the newest series *Risque Nude Fragment* of 2010, created after these abstract paintings, individual body parts resurface. They originate from nude photographs taken in Russia around 1900 and distributed as dangerous pictures. These pictures were called *Risque Nude*. Imbach's pictures, based on these originals, are painted more cautiously; the flesh is aristocratic white. Looking like frazzled baroque images, these paintings have an air of elegance. Entire body parts can be seen in these paintings, though—as in earlier works—never the human head. His body, disengaged from “humanity,” develops energies that explode outside of the head, the seat of reason. Following the ideas of the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, himself influenced by the French writer Georges Bataille, who in turn, inspired by a drawing by Surrealist André Masson, wished to create a creature exempt from all reason. His *Acephal*, a creature freed of its head, was to have command over undreamt of energies: “Man escaped from his head like the condemned has escaped from his prison. He found beyond him not God, who is in prohibition of crime, but a being who doesn't know prohibitions. Beyond what I am, I meet a being, who makes me laugh, because he is headless, who fills me with anguish, because he is made of innocence and crime... He is not a man. But he isn't God, either. He is not I, but he is more than I...” *Acéphale* was also the title of the magazine that Bataille published together with Masson in Paris in the 1930s.

Escape routes from the prison of being human? Especially the aesthetic theory was mostly skeptical of such excursions beyond a humanity defined as humane undertaken by writers and artists. Un-

til recently, the Surrealist unleashing of monstrous forces seemed to remain a historical episode. Today, however, surreal creatures surface in film, in photography, and in painting. Unleashed violence, fragmented bodies, and bizarre sexuality spread increasingly in contemporary exhibition rooms, cinemas, and on television (not to mention on the Internet), but the purpose is no longer to break open the limitations of humanity by means of art as was the program of the Surrealists.

It is rather reality itself that finds its expression in art, which due to the electronic duplication of images and the massive access to the Internet has already developed into its own monstrous world, exceeding the wildest fantasies of the Surrealists. This world can no longer be reached with theoretical, documentary, or even sociological examination. It is Bataille's analogies and following in this tradition those of the painter Samuel Imbach that provide insight into the often vertiginous depths of today's humaneness. In this world, writes the French thinker Jean-Luc Nancy, art "as a sensually mediating testimony and inscription of the overloading of the senses" has a very specific task. In this world we can't get away from the monstrous.