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Introduction: How the pictures and sculptures of Michael Kalmbach come into being

At first it may surprise us to learn that Michael Kalmbach, whose art is decisively figurative, often begins working on his pictures and sculptures using abstract forms and processes. If one realizes, however, that he grew up during the heyday of minimal art and the sculptural concepts of Joseph Beuys, which develop ideas of the organic and the crystalline, one recognizes this process-based practice as a new and dynamic dialogue with formative experiences in his early development.

The Watercolors

When Kalmbach paints with watercolours, his distilling of an image from the accidental almost reminds us of alchemy. At first the artist covers the flat, wet sheets of paper, some of which are over two meters square, with a type of "primordial soup" comprising of different big puddles of colour. The paper buckles; in the water clouds of liquid colour blend together, reflecting light. A transformation happens as the paper dries: the particles of paint freely settle on the paper ground, giving it largely unforeseeable tonal values. Kalmbach studies this, taking the outcome as a challenging starting point. What happened by chance stimulates memories of clouds, clods of earth, plants. We spontaneously recognize an illusionistic space, a landscape or a boundless cosmic space in which the pictorial elements appear to float.

Today it seems obvious to us that through this technique "inner" or emotional pictorial worlds are visualised. But we should remember that Kalmbach's generation, who find psychoanalytical and everyday psychological ways of thinking completely natural, work considerably more rational than even the Surrealists, who searched for an encounter between the conscious and the unconscious on a new level. Instead of avoiding the vocabulary of former art in the search for the new, as their predecessors did, Kalmbach and his contemporaries cite and consciously use it.

It requires little to populate the resulting illusionistic space. Two curves, a brief elevation and an underscoring line, and already a cloudy formation looks at us like a jellyfishes phantom features - other faces Kalmbach works out more precisely, so that the sheet soon seems to react to the observer in a different concrete form. Kalmbach is fascinated by this creation of physiognomies, which reflect elements of ourselves in the paintings and form natural or unconscious connections. In working like this, he is emphasising a level of expression in art that is often neglected by art historians, who prefer

to draw a clear line between the abstract art of the 20th Century and historical figure painting (for example with Piero della Francesca).

However, Kalmbach, unlike figurative artists of previous generations, doesn't follow any preconceived topic. The scenarios in his pictures arise playfully in a dialogue with his technical requirements. The artist starts out from individual figures, the gawky bodies and round heads of which he again quickly renders or carefully designs. One being evokes the next, stimulates it by its position in space, by a pose or gesture. Situational, anecdotal or even narrative connections only develop organically – not least because Kalmbach hopes to come closer to the meaning of the individual figures in this way. In his head, the artist continually connects his pictures to stories. The book "Der große und der kleine Paul ("The Tall and the Small Paul") was developed in this way in 2005, connecting images developed earlier for a kind of creation story.

Here, Kalmbach among other ideas developed the meaning of a motif, in which little figures look out from inside a larger one. This can be interpreted in different ways. The little creatures could live inside the giant body, as friends or parasites. They also could represent parts of the body. In the picture book, the image became a birth motif: the little boys emerge from the larger one, they are born like Bacchus was born out of a leg, or Athene out of a head.

The starting point for another book could be the gaze of the moon onto the earth, as Kalmbach has represented it in a watercolour with a figure looking upwards. He decided spontaneously to represent the earth instead of the moon in the sky. The effect, primarily on our perception of the light and the colours in the painting, is amazing. With the moon, the violet sky works as a night time shadow; with the earth in the sky, the same colour takes on a surreal quality. The atmosphere changes.

Some of Kalmbach's pictorial inventions are so complex that they seem to already form a story by themselves -- like the watercolour "-wesen" ("-being") in which a giant holds one of the smaller figures surrounding him in his hand. Despite the difference in size, he seems not so much dangerous as helpless, his thin, attenuated body surrounded by clouds that impede his view and his physical progress. Only the little girl in a starched skirt, who appears softly in his chest, gives him an inner stability. Smaller figures also look through his eyes. A Trojan monster?

Kalmbach's picture worlds are anarchic, often politically incorrect and seem anything but U-certificate, the more so since his protagonists are often children. But the fantasies which he realizes in his pictures, sculptures and installations closely resemble those of children, growing up freely, filled with

curiosity, tenderness but also cruelty. Are they inspired by Kalmbach's own memories? The mutual compression of content and atmosphere recalls the work of the Swiss artist Otto Meyer-Amden, friend and inspiration to Oskar Schlemmer. This artist also wanted to bring the fantasies of his boyhood into the present through the dream like atmosphere in his painting.

The Sculpture

With Kalmbach, sculpture and painting influence themselves mutually. Watercolours can inspire sculptures, sometimes sculptures are like models for paintings. Kalmbach the sculptor often begins from a formal interest, too; thus he resolved for example though the figure of the vomiting boy, the problem of producing a hovering figure with an internal logic of its own without hanging it. And as in his painting, Kalmbach seldom follows a concept in his sculptures to its conclusion. He must often reject ideas since they cannot be realized. In fact modelling with papier-mâché, plaster or clay can be as free as painting with watercolours. With his sculptures Kalmbach can change or convert different elements any time, i.e. take off a leg, exchange legs with arms, attach more heads etc. He also allows different materials to stimulate new formal ideas. The severely stretched boy figures, apparently so fragile, came about when Kalmbach first began to put papier-mâché onto wire maquettes. The title of the sculpture "Alberto" refers to the similarity of these figures to the works of the sculptor Giacometti. But this boy who leans on a doll gyroscope is of a different precarious existence to the flat, dry forms of the Swiss artist. By balancing a man and a thing of a similar shape, Kalmbach points to an essential aspect of his idea of art.

Because, as with the watercolours, Kalmbach feels enthusiastic about creating human figures in sculpture. And as with the painting, he is looking for possibilities to order and to connect. Even his clay portrait figures, which are made directly from the person sitting for him, seem to strive towards one another, as if those strangers would like to get to know one another. Up to now, however, complex configurations arise primarily in work made from plaster or papier-mâché. Here Kalmbach achieves the greatest coherence between the initial impulse and the figurative materialization in the representation of 'floating' figures.

A good example for this is the sculptural group "Prince Charming". The central figure is a lumbering, fragmentary fellow, who, like a planet, has forced small shapeless lumps and human figures into his orbit. His shape itself can be interpreted as a product of gravitation; genitals, phallic shaped nose and sticking-out eyes could have landed where they are through the gravitational pull of the head and body mass – a chance birth which, at the same time, points to the process of creating a plastic form.

The Gesamtkunstwerk

Kalmbach's extending of individual works into groups and series tends towards a visual Gesamtkunstwerk or a synthesis of the arts. Some years ago, with Jürgen Kisch, he worked out the concept for an installation in the Frankfurt "Ausstellungsraum", for which he made stucco work and mural painting. Then, in 2007, Kalmbach showed for the first time his walk-in "Kinderzimmer" ("Child's Room") with clay and papier-mâché sculptures, jumping jacks and pictures, as well as specifically-designed furniture and wallpaper, all by him. The works speak of moments of relation and education, primarily between parents and children, coloured partly in satirically grotesque, partly melancholic tones. When walking through it, one experiences selectively that dense dream atmosphere again that is the primary characteristic of the big paintings and sculptural ensembles. At the same time, however, the observer experiences in a nearly physical way the collision of imagination and reality; the space left to him or her between the works has the effect of an all-consuming vacuum. The interaction of Kalmbach's different creations conveys more than only the sum of their individual power – they constitute an existential aesthetic experience.