

## Grotesqueries and Caricature: An Interview with Ulrike Theusner

**Berlin, Dec. 2013:** Ulrike Theusner paints monsters, beasts and brutes that are most frightening for being familiar. Her luscious watercolors, ink drawings and oil paintings are juicy with pictorial depth and detail while her characters burst and bubble with energy. Yet, despite these surface delights, her content is serious, dark and timely. Theusner's images recall Goya's grotesqueries and Otto Dix's brutally seductive social caricature. Many of her characters wear historical costume, like ghosts staging a play, but she also directs sharp attention towards today's political and social inequalities. Using wit and beauty, her work highlights contemporary culture's poisonous absurdity and underlying moments of horror. Here, she leads us through the worlds that she makes, which are disturbingly close to ours.



Ulrike Theusner, *Halloween party*, ink on paper, 30 x 40cm, 2012; Courtesy of the artist.

**Ana Finel Honigman: What does colour mean to you?**

**Ulrike Theusner:** Colours express feelings, sentiments, moods. They speak directly to my subconscious, like music. I always use colours intuitively.

**AFH: How do you interpret your use of candy colours in relation with your darker imagery?**

**UT:** Candy colours stand in contrast to the content. They support the effect of the apparent idyll, change and deform the mood of the image: the first impression becomes a different reality if you look closer. Another aspect of

using these colours is my approach to allegorical paintings of Baroque and Rococo – such as Poussin, Rubens, Fragonard who became an ongoing fascination for me.

**AFH:** *Your painting **The Secret** presents an Anonymous activist holding his finger to his lips. Are you simply fascinated by or do you support the hacktivist revolution?*

**UT:** I can see a general querulousness when it comes to politics in my generation. People are focused on their own success, while predicting a dark future for society. There is not enough indignation. I only support the arising awareness of political issues. Assange provokes debates about issues that would otherwise remain unnoticed. A change can only take place if you know about the system. Maybe the time isn't ripe yet, but the Occupy movement is a start towards forming a political consciousness that is missing in the land of plenty. I wouldn't say that my art that is political. I am only reflecting on circumstances and conditions around me because I can't do anything else.

**AFH:** *As a German, what are your thoughts about American culture and American politics? I, a native New Yorker, like your images of feral creatures toppling the White House. I would love to hear more about your attitude towards the reach and content of America's power systems.*

**UT:** For me American politics and American culture are two separate things. As it is everywhere, the personal interests of a few dominate common good. Although I experienced Americans as open-minded while having a strong corporate feeling, it seems that they react very negatively to any indication of socialism. I don't understand what is wrong with having public health care and free education? For Europeans it is hard to understand that attending a University is almost unaffordable to most Americans. Education and knowledge are the future of every society. Therefore, they must be free for all, to provide equal chances for everybody.



Ulrike Theusner, *Maybe I should be more ambitious*, ink on paper, 22 x 30cm, 2012; Courtesy of the artist.

**AFH: You have a bewitching watercolour of an opulently attired monkey with the words "maybe I should be more ambitious" delicately drawn next to his upturned face. Was that image intended as a psychological self-portrait? Can you explain the context for that work?**

**UT:** As many characters in my drawings, I could say that my painting of him is a self-portrait. In this work I'm questioning myself. I am asking whether I should be more ambitious about my self-manifestation as an artist. I like to hide in my studio rather than show up everywhere. I know that part of any business, not just art, involves showing up. Having a large network is an essential part of being able to make your living. Having the right contacts almost seems to be more important than the actual work. In the art business, I observe a cult of personality. Hence, I created a portrait of myself as a performing circus monkey.

**AFH: Do you think of your sculptures as three-dimensional versions of your paintings or are they separate worlds?**

**UT:** I see my sculptures more as a model for my drawings. Maybe, one day, they will function alone. In the meantime, doing three-dimensional work is a totally different approach for me. In three-dimensions, I am able to play like a child and experiment. I can create landscapes and worlds in a never-ending procedure. In contrast, an ink drawing is finished pretty quickly. I admire artwork that allows the viewer to escape in another world. I like the work of Chris Burden, for example. In this way, three-dimensional work has the big advantage above drawing since it can be seen from different perspectives. In the future, I definitely want to deepen this path in my work.

**AFH: What work of fiction has influenced your art most?**

**UT:** When I was a teenager, the surrealistic stories by German writer Michael Ende motivated me to visualize the scenes that I create. I was especially inspired by the chaotic and destructive scenes from *Phantasia [The Neverending Story]*, in which the land is slowly disappearing because humans have lost their imaginations. Later on in my life, Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* inspired me a lot. I still find parallels between it and my work. I am also interested in investigating heterotopic systems: "The beautiful Life", "Welcome to paradise", "Remaking Eden" are titles of my work series.

**AFH: Your work is very theatrical. Do you conceive of whole stories when imaging your images or do you envision each image as isolated and self-contained? Are these like snap-shots of larger narratives?**

**UT:** That's a good description, I would see most of the work as snapshots of larger narratives. Often a greater subject will appear afterwards, like in my series of metaphoric pastels called "Nitro Circus." This series consists of separate drawings that show the world as a theatrum mundi: Vanity, Inanity, Caducity. When I plan larger works then I conceive of whole stories like my version of "A Rake's Progress." That is a fifteen-meter drawing that I'm working

on right now. Although the chapters are already specified, I populate them with my own protagonists and tell the story in my own visual language. Sometimes I also decide in the first place to create a series of drawings about a certain subject such as my "New York Diaries" series of forty ink drawings based on my feelings and experiences while living in New York.



Ulrike Theusner, *french carnaval*, 40 x 60cm, oil on paper, 2011; Courtesy of the artist.

**AFH: Frankly, I am most unnerved by your painting French Carnaval. Can you tell me about its context? Maybe calm me down with details.**

**UT:** The painting shows a group of politicians with distorted faces. I found the original image in French newspaper from 2010. I didn't need to significantly change their faces to create discomfort. It's disquieting to see a growing interest in the extreme right and young people who are demonstrating against the equal opportunities for homosexuals in France, the motherland of democracy and human rights. Some of the masks remind me of President Nicolas Sarkozy.

**AFH: What frightens you most?**

**UT:** Bereavement, inner devils and losing control. That's why I don't like to take strong psychogenic drugs. I feel all my inner monsters could become reality and that would be awful.

Ana Finel Honigman

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