

artist – role – model

By Ana Finel Honigman

Ulrike Theusner is an accomplished artist and also a successful model, not merely an amalgam of both. Although her extraordinary angular and expressive features have appeared in ads for Alexander McQueen, Balenciaga and Clarins Paris, she is equally home in the studio. She studied at the Bauhaus Universität Weimar and the Ecoles des Beaux Art in Nice, and has exhibited in German and France. Unlike a certain Slavic supermodel's skill-starved solipsistic self-portraits, and another catwalk crawler's doodles of naked women, Theusner's paintings have a mysterious motional intensity that is amplified by her unglamorous subject matter. Instead of painting her own image or scenes from her day-job, she devotes her significant talent to rendering unnerving and historically intriguing subjects, skillfully painted in unfashionably dark and thought-provoking canvases. On the eve of fashion week, we talk about art and modeling and how the two do or don't connect for her.

sleek: What are some of the historical and intellectual influences on your choice of subject matter and style?

UT: My influences are Bosch, Dürer, Goya, Rembrandt, Ensor, Munch and the Natural History Museum.

sleek: Do you also model for other artists or are you mostly interested in keeping the two careers creatively separate?

UT: I try to keep them separate. Modeling is a job and sometimes inspiration. But it's not my main interest or the subject of my artwork.

sleek: Do you think that there are aspects of modeling that are generally overlooked or under-developed in people's assumptions about the job?

UT: Oh sure! Most people are more interested in my modeling story than my art. Modeling signifies glamour, money, celebrities and coolness while art is "interesting" but also poor and weird. When I tell people that I'm an artist they ask immediately: "And how do you earn your money?" They'd never ask this of a model, yet models are often totally broke. Instead, they think models are all rich, anorexic, and drug junkies.

sleek: Why do you think non-fashion people find models and modeling such an interesting subject? Is it just that beautiful women always attract attention or do you think that there is some other reason?

UT: I really don't know where this interest in models comes from. I think filmmaking, acting, dancing, music and art are so more interesting. I have truly no idea. Of course beautiful people attract attention. But this job and the whole fashion business are the perfect projection screen for dreams and desires: never-ending beauty, traveling the world, luxury, and money all over. It's just another way to escape reality.

sleek: Speaking of reality – some of your paintings of animals are truly heart wrenching. Others are more whimsical. What are your views on animal rights and animal welfare?

UT: Of course we have to respect and protect life. Animal welfare is an important issue but also a big business. I'm not a vegetarian, I love eating meat sometimes but I'm always kind of grateful that I can eat it.

sleek: Grateful? How? I'm pretty positive that I agree but explain.

UT: I eat with a certain reverence for that animal. I think: "Thank you dear cow, for letting me eat you." Everyone should do that – I'm sure people would eat less meat, and probably only "happy" animals' meat.

sleek: How much do you think art school influenced your work?

UT: Art school didn't influence me a lot. I was traveling all the time anyway, that influence was much stronger and interesting than that coming from some (mostly frustrated) teachers. Good about art school were the energy, the exchange and having time to experience.

sleek: Do you feel that a formal art education should be valued as highly as it is for serious aspiring artists?

UT: No, but people take you more serious as an artist just because you went to art school. It's more about exchange and getting in contact with other artists. I think it's very important for painters to have an art education, to take drawing and painting classes; it's also a craft. But there are only a few art schools that teach you the real important stuff.

sleek: Do you feel that modeling has influenced how you view and represent the human body?

UT: I always liked the "non-perfect" body, it's more interesting to watch and to draw. I'm more fascinated by ugliness than absolute beauty. But because of my modeling I see even more how people want to be young forever. It's getting weird – imagine, in a couple of years it will be as normal to Botox your face as shaving your legs or something. Imagine all these Botox people.

sleek: They already exist and they are so creepy! It's like they all put their faces into the same machine. Has modeling changed your perception of beauty?

UT: No, not really. It's just made it clearer to me that beauty nowadays means youth. I see more and more creepy faces that want to be young forever.

sleek: Back to another credential-making category. Which emerging fashion cities do you find most promising or that best fit your personal aesthetic?

UT: Berlin! Provisional, relaxed and sometimes apocalyptic. Just hope it's not getting stiff one day.

sleek: Do you think that modeling makes it easier or more difficult to gain a proper audience for your art?

UT: It's probably depending on how famous you are. But I think it makes it easier. As long as you are not called the "Model Artist" or "the Model, who is also painting." I wouldn't like that...