

Ana Finel Honigman

Rollicking demons, trapped souls, demonically enchanted animals, and gleeful ghouls may populate Ulrike Theusner's watercolor paintings, pastel drawings, and drypoint etchings. But in the end she embodies Charles Baudelaire's flâneur—a connoisseur of everyday experience who inserts details of her own surroundings into other peoples' internal worlds and interactions. Artists create ongoing self-portraits through their work, revealing themselves through choice of content and manner of expression. Theusner's gracefully observed, diaristic images invite others into her eternally curious and wonderous worldview.

Although Theusner paints from snapshots, her portraits convey the awkwardness, tension, and isolation of real-life, real-time social encounters. Integrating both everyday and phantasmagorical characters into common surroundings, they create worlds where frightening and strange sights make sense and familiar ones become arrestingly fascinating. She uses fantasy, balletic strokes, and a sugary palette to reveal the darker side of art parties, bars, fashion events, the streets of the cities she visits, and Weimar, where she grew up and still lives. Her imagery, technique, and talent inspire comparisons with Francisco Goya, Edgar Degas, and James Ensor while remaining topical and contemporary.

In an interview conducted at her studio in December 2014, Theusner explained, "Candy colors 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. Colours express feelings, sentiments, moods. They speak directly to my subconscious, like music. I always use colours intuitively. 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."<sup>1</sup>

The subjects she selects and the obvious affection she exhibits in depicting them demonstrate Theusner's quest for connections between people. Preferring appreciation instead of objectifying, her empathy in capturing male beauty evokes Elizabeth Peyton's portraits of male celebrities. Gender perimeters and assumptions melt away in her work—creating a fully contemporary, utopian vision of fluid affection. Her drypoint image of *Two Boys Kissing* (2020) highlights a lithe beauty and romance between two men. The languid posture and beautiful features of the young man in *The Idol* (2020, p. 94) has the captivating chill and pose of Oscar Wilde's Bosie. The seemingly sad figure in a framed painting behind him appears to look outwards with longing or envy, perhaps jealous of his life or hoping he won't walk away. Another young man, who appears drunk and slumped against a barroom's mirrored booth, is shown with tenderness and affinity in *Maxime* (2020).

For Theusner, the challenge of relationships between people and their environments can also be compelling. She explains that she is drawn to "anything out of normalcy. I am more interested in authenticity but I

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<sup>1</sup> Ana Finel Honigman, "Grotesqueries and Caricature: An Interview with Ulrike Theusner," ARTslant (2014), <https://ulrike-theusner.de/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/artslant-2013.pdf> (accessed on July 27, 2021).

also find self-consciousness interesting and inspiring.”<sup>2</sup> Representing a pinnacle of ordinary easiness with contemporary conventions and norms in her pastel *Venus, New York Diaries* (2019), Theusner shows a fashionable young woman taking a selfie but doesn’t criticize her vanity. Instead, her subject’s studied expression and relaxed posture hint at selfdiscovery through crafting her own surface allure. In *Postcards from the New World – Girls I* (2021, p. 108), a sex worker wearing BDSM subgear is seen mid-shimmy, her body in movement. The woman’s arms are encased in latex opera gloves, and she wears a slave collar but also a spiked armband, presenting strength in her coded declaration of submission.

Her face is beyond the page’s frame, leaving her body to carry all the necessary information of her competency, identification, and affinities. The energy emanating in blue and black strokes of color reinforces her position as the star of a world she creates through an erotic ability to command desire into being.

Although Theusner’s figures often appear still within their settings, they generate an aura of uncanny sensitivity to the work’s atmosphere. A beautiful young man identified as Taylor (p. 86) in a 2020 pastel portrait, for example, is seen sitting on a bench with a pink satchel over his shoulder and his coat splayed over his knee. The setting could be a bus stop, and he might be commuting or running away, going nowhere in particular or somewhere life-altering. Giving away no clues, he looks impassively at the viewer. His tee shirt features a black-on-black image of an impish figure, which may be a coded avatar of his inner being whose sinister, broad smile is in conflict with Taylor’s expressionless visage, while its arms are raised in a mock hug and its legs spread across the boy’s chest. Hovering behind the figure’s right shoulder is another figure, etched into glass, wearing underwear and a sad face, with arms stretched emptily as if it wants but won’t receive a cuddle. Their grotesque emotionality contrasts with the real boy’s blankness to hint at a hidden imaginative or supernatural world the fabric of his banal, observable reality.

To the same effect, the name Taylor reemerges in the title of a drawing depicting a waving figure underneath a grinning demon head. *Taylor with Mask* (2020, p. 102) shows a cheerful fiend with pink flesh and red eyes emerging from a frenetically charged background. The human hands and torso surrounded by shoulder-length hair are lean and relaxed. The mask is vibrant not vicious, and weird but welcoming. Of the two images, the one exposing the boy’s face is more foreboding because his human reserve creates greater mysteries than the monster persona.

Speaking about her work’s underlining ethical foundations, Theusner advocates for tolerance and empathy. “I don’t think of myself as moralistic,” she says. “I am just interested in people and society. I want to see myself in this society and understand it all. I might prefer certain behavior, but I am not criticizing anyone. I am just observing. I am not critical because I am not proposing better behavior. I don’t know what that would be.”<sup>3</sup> The answer, however, may be interwoven into the atmosphere

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<sup>2</sup> Personal communication with the artist on April 9, 2021.

<sup>3</sup> Honigman, “Grotesqueries and Caricature.”

she creates. Without proselytizing, she shows beauty in vulnerability and uniqueness while graphically depicting the horror of misguided and maliciously intended emotions. The alternative realities that her work invokes allude to the Jungian shadows within each of us with candor and bravery.

Despite the objectivity she claims to espouse, convictions and preferences readily emerge from Theusner's art. Years before the #MeToo movement exposed widespread abuses of authority, Theusner created a series of etchings whose mythological metaphors illustrate the predation she witnessed—the relationship between the hunter and the prey—and experienced as a top fashion model and young woman in the art community. One image shows an elegant woman's face with hollowed-out eyes and the dehumanizing sexual demand she made to another woman written underneath, while another depicts a male's head with a massive penis protruding from his mouth like a medieval gargoyle, captioned with an unambiguous invitation to visit his hotel room. Showing male and female predators issuing despicable summonses called out aspects of the art world's inner dynamics that had gone unspoken and dismissed for too long.

Whether their visions are taken from the tangible world or the underworld of our collective unconscious, Theusner's portraits and narrative images alike express an unnerving combination of comfort and curiosity, skittishness and strength, intimacy and remove. Her art presents what Baudelaire described as a creative existence acting as "a mirror as vast as the crowd itself; or ... a kaleidoscope gifted with consciousness."<sup>4</sup> In her hands, flakes and flickers of the outside world coalesce into patterns and configurations that draw attention to their simultaneous individuality and interconnectedness. Observing fumbled social exchanges, underhanded maneuverings and psychologically loaded social rituals, her energy and insight weaves them together into a sweetly colored palpable world.

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<sup>4</sup> Charles Baudelaire, *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*, transl. Jonathan Mayne (London: Phaidon Press, 1965), 9.