

THE INEXPLICABLE  
AND THE INEFFABLE  
Interview by Diana Weis

DIANA WEIS (DW)

In contrast to Berlin, where I've come from today, Weimar seems completely quiet and almost as if fallen outside of time. Do you need this calm to work in?

ULRIKE THEUSNER (UT)

Weimar is a very special, auratic place—here you live as if in a capsule with yourself. It is also a very ambivalent place. Here the spirit of Classicism and the vision of modernity are juxtaposed with humankind's greatest wrongdoings. I'm very sensitized to external impressions. A great city really does me in after a while. In New York, I sometimes get short of breath in the middle of the street, for no reason. I always have to withdraw to be able to process it. But I need this sensitivity to pick everything up. My work is based on a very intense perception; I soak up everything around me. All the auras and life and visual impressions, they bombard me; I constantly observe and interrogate them.

DW

Does the title of the exhibition, *Grelle Gegenwart* (Garish Present), describe this feeling?

UT

Garish is an aggressive, excessive word. For me, it also describes the pandemic time that lies behind us, this withdrawal from life, although what just happened can hardly be processed. But there are also positive aspects: garish can mean not only blinding, droning, or screaming, but also clearly and brightly illuminated.

DW

At least in terms of color, however, at first glance the pictures seem subdued and softened.

UT

The big screeching in the title relates more to what is behind the faces—an inner fury turned outward by demons and ghostly figures.

DW

Does present in the title also mean that these are mostly new works?

UT

The exhibited pictures are current, tethered to time. Most of them are from the years 2018 to 2021.

Yet everything in life runs circularly, and I often experience that older works can take on a new currency again. With my work on *Sweet Bird of Youth* (2018), a series of portraits in drypoint engravings, I found my way back to pastel drawings with very fine, precise lines, many of which can be seen in the exhibition. These works take up the thread of earlier series and pictorial ideas and carry them forward: in the series *New York Diaries* (from 2009 on), *A Rake's Progress* (2015), and *Gaspung Society* (2016), the central motif is people's lack of relationship to each other, now thematically further developed, based on my own observations and experiences.

DW

Some of your portraits were created based on social media postings. Is the way people stage themselves in the internet an expression of this lack of relationship?

UT

I find it very interesting to observe where the boundary runs between authenticity and artificiality.

When I'm with people, I often try to photograph them in unexpected moments. When they are just rolling a cigarette or are lost in thought. These pictures have a completely different gesture, of course, from someone who stages himself in the digital theater. But both have the same importance. Both are expressions of a person and reveal his or her interior world.

DW

What happens on the symbolic level when a digital image becomes a work of art?

UT

Images in the digital world are condemned to live fast. In contrast, I give them intense attention by transposing them into a timely technique. Then, inner demons move to the forefront, slink around the portrayed persons, or appear on their clothing. There is an externalization of interior life that cannot be depicted photographically in the same way. My ambition is to capture something of this life. But filtered through my feeling.

DW

How exactly do you proceed when creating a portrait?

UT

I usually work with photos and notes from my sketchbook in which I capture initial ideas and possible sections of the picture. With photos, fleeting encounters can be quickly captured; in sketches, my feelings are visible. I want to be able to see all the details, for example, of the clothing. When making a rough sketch, I wouldn't pay such close attention, but in a photo, everything is there and can be intentionally distorted or taken up precisely as it is. A portrait is figurative but never realistic.

DW

Who are the people in the portraits? Friends?

UT

Usually, yes. Or at least people with whom I can build a relationship. Their life surroundings are thus important and are closely connected with the portraits. They are often seekers, artists, or actors who live practically on the fringes of society. Will-o'-the-wisp figures who embody great freedom. At the same time, they are often mirror images of me. If I find something of myself in the other person, then I can tell a story with that. Fundamentally, they are all self-portraits.

DW

A figure that repeatedly appears in your pictures is death as a skeleton.

What does death mean to you?

UT

I think the reason I treat death so often is to shed my fear of it. By personalizing death and making him my constant companion, he seems less threatening to me. Because the fear of death is also a fear of life. And this fear inhibits me. That's why I always take him along with me and let him emerge briefly and say, "Hello, here I am. But it's okay." Maybe he'll disappear from my pictures again when I've made my peace with him.

DW

When I compare your earlier portraits with the current ones, I notice that the figures are now less ethereal, as if their relationship to the world had changed. What happened?

UT

I am aware of that, too, that in recent years a development has come about—away from the bloodless, entranced faces. My portraits now show people who are confident enough to enter into a relationship—with the viewer, but also with themselves. These are no longer people

separated from themselves and blindly roaming about, but people who no longer want to be determined by others. They stare directly at those they confront and pose concrete questions: Who are we? How do we want to live? How do we encounter each other? These are the central questions in art, but also the central questions of our time.

DW

The immense solitude of your earlier portraits can now be felt in your cityscapes. What is the uncanny aspect of urban life?

UT

In an artificial environment, your own mirror image is also distorted. In the exhibition, there is a whole series of empty walls of buildings and views of the city in which figures appear only schematically, like ghosts or bizarre drawings on the walls of the buildings, as if the people there had become invisible as they fled themselves. In our civilized, extremely complex, and progressive world, we are in danger of losing our relationship to ourselves. The monotype series *Postcards from the New World* (2021, pp. 104-109) is shaped by this experience.

DW

You first went to New York in your early twenties to work as a model there. Did that shape your view of the city?

UT

The job meant nothing to me; I always sequestered it from myself. Maybe my experience with objectification in the fashion industry ultimately helped me assert myself as a young female artist on the testosterone-charged art market. I processed these experiences in the series *Desperate Art Bitches* (2015, pp. 42-43)

DW

The huge forest picture in the exhibition stands in contrast to the dreariness of the cityscapes. Is the solitude in nature a different one?

UT

You can't be lonely in nature. The forest is a protected place full of consolation and vibrancy, a cathedral of trees, far from the pathological environment of the cities. You can also see the forest as a symbol for your own psyche, as an entrance to your own unconscious, your own psychological wilderness.

DW

What do the grotesque grimaces and masks in your picture stand for?

UT

Masks are mediators between us and the ineffable or the inexplicable. They are mythologically charged as a firm component in ritual performances, which are increasingly withdrawing into the background in a modern, highly technologized world that thinks it can control and understand everything. Nonetheless, in their archaic character, masks are still fascinating, as if they were announcing the existence of a completely different reality that is otherwise invisible to us. This demonic aspect of masks always fascinated me; some of my first pictures, which I painted when I was just fourteen, already showed masked processions and people in costume. Just like the ghostly figures in my pictures, they are symbols that have been anchored in human memory for thousands of years and that repeatedly force us to reflect upon ourselves.

DW

There is also a self-portrait in which your face is concealed by a mask.

UT

Masks can help let something emerge that slumbers within you anyway, but for which life otherwise provides no scope.

You see these bright eyes staring at you. A few years ago, I probably

would have left the eyes empty. But now I want the viewer to see the person behind the mask.

DW

What is it that one can find behind the masks?

UT

Through art, you can encounter yourself. That makes art indispensable for a society. My desire and decision to become an artist was not a romantic idea, but always connected with a profession of great urgency. With my pictorial worlds, I want to convey my feelings and perceptions and thereby let a dialogue between the picture and the viewer come about. That is my hope, my demand on art: that my works will open up paths or awaken things that the viewer was not previously aware of.