

THIS RED STAGE

Felix Krämer interviewing Tanja Nittka

KRÄMER: Almost all your paintings show a Berlin brothel – how has this choice of motifs come about?

NITTKA: This Berlin brothel exists, but I have only seen part of that house, the one that seduced me. That house looked at me, right through the crevice of a window, by daylight, and I looked back. There I thought I recognized Nana's bed. Nana, a historic figure, has become famous not only by Émile Zola and her bed really exists. I have painted it as a kind of postscript of the series *Les chambres* (*Le lit*, 2016).

KRÄMER: What has been your intention?

NITTKA: You ask me to open the window wide, but too much light frightens the secrets. It is the secrets that «you can make mysteriously again slowly», as Inger Christensen wrote in her labyrinthian narration *The painted room*. The paintings, as I understand them, are a smiling invitation, evidently addressed both to men and women, ladies and gentlemen.

My invitation is to have a look at the cabinet of absence by looking at the perceivable world, the *intérieur*. That what is absent might be imagined and you may call it erotic. Nudity is marvellous, but it is not the most interesting thing.

KRÄMER: What has been your procedure?

NITTKA: To open the door you, of course, need an entrée to such a discreet house, and I had an acquaintance inform the propriortress that my project was not investigating journalism but painting. The first time I met her was when she was preparing a meal for her family in the kitchen. «Feel at home», I thought. Generously she allowed me to stroll through the rooms as I liked, outside opening hours as I had wished. Consciously I did not want to become too familiar with this place, for distance or nearness – whichever – is important to me.

I couldn't paint in the rooms for there it is a bit too dark as it is in churches. Even by means of artificial lightening I would not have been able to see well enough. That is why I had to make use of photographic impressions and – even more important – of my memory. Often did I not find the well-hidden light switches and, after a while, I did not look for them, for as a painter you put the light you choose, the sort of lights you have seen somewhere and sometime.

KRÄMER: Is yours a closed sequence?

NITKA: Yes, definitely closed. Once you have taken the risk to go there, there is no escaping. But to answer your question seriously: I work like a writer. As I see it one sequence or one series is like a kind of novel. There is a first and a last page. The scenery, this red stage, is rather a spectacular sujet and there have been enormous personal struggles to finally be able to engage myself for nearly two years – apart from a few other paintings and while preparing my next large series – ending up in a large-format painting (*La voile rouge*, 2016/17). There, in this finale, you might completely get lost in a complicated reflection.

At present I have turned back to painting where I like being, hidden in some secluded gardens of Italy and in the *Rosenroman* by Guillaume de Lorris dating from the 13th century.

KRÄMER: In *Les chambres*, how have you approached the topic that played an important part in the history of art which – however – is scarcely of central interest for the artists of today?

NITKA: I should not comment much on the present, on today's art. Things are developing. Those recent works of art that I know and that refer to that topic are photographic works. They soberly reflect the visible facts of rooms in use. A chamber, however, is something different. It has got a kind of personality. People knew each other in those establishments, they spent their time in a society beyond the established society. You risked a relationship, you risked your life at a period of syphilis. Anyway, the solitude of men had a certain home there, attractive, in particular for artists. You could communicate in the safe «behind», which was impossible to utter openly elsewhere.

And us, we seemingly live in the present. Our present state, however, our existence is composed of many items from the past, which I listen to, as soon as there is an indication of something old. Painters invested their souls in their works of art. Where do our souls become apparent today? We claim that we are able to understand and explain everything. The miserable show-off of our insistent ego, isn't that boring for the people of today? Above that, I am frightened by the efficient pragmatism by means of which we get to know and love each other.

KRÄMER: Prostitution does not seem to be really the subject of your series. There appear neither erotica nor condoms. Don't you worry that your paintings might be regarded as a transfigured, even nostalgic view of the so called «Oldest Trade»?

NITKA: It is not very up-to-date to be nostalgic, is it? But I am not modern in its general sense. I don't intend to have a look at the «Oldest Trade» at all, but rather put the rooms of this trade at the viewers disposal. In a hundred years, perhaps people will find a handwritten message saying: «We love in different ways today.»

KRÄMER: Your sequence is gambling with voyeuristic affinities of the viewer without satisfying these expectations. It's striking that no real figures can be seen on any of your pieces. Why?

NITTKA: Human figures are rather rare in my works. I am interested in the rooms in which they were present. Do you miss them? They are everywhere, aren't they? You have to move very far away to be on your own once. But people are wonderful, and I do respect them a lot. I really like watching them talking, lying, trying to tell the truth. For a year I drew myself once every day in order to look closely at a face. Each flicker of a face and a body is like a miracle. They keep moving all the time, like the sea. Yet, I would like to venture near miracles later.

Last year I spectacularly failed to paint the mountains. Although you might think they are patient, on the surface of it. They are so beautiful and huge and they might just as well dissolve in the air. However I only thought: Who am I that I may dare to paint them? One pencil centimetre represents a complete mountain top on my sheet of paper. But I go on trying because I am fond of spending my time with them.

Let me come back to your question. I can't satisfy certain expectations for maybe I am a serving person, but I am not a service provider who keeps on responding «Pleasure» whenever you say «Thank you». Fortunately I am not responsible for what the viewer sees.

KRÄMER: Many paintings are characterized by mysterious shadows. They hint at, they suggest something, yet they do not offer any certainty. How important is this certain openness to you?

NITTKA: It is most important to me and it pleases me that you call it openness.

KRÄMER: And although your views and details like wallpapers, furniture and visual axis are repeated, it is difficult to find your way in the *intérieur*. The mirror is a recurrent motif. Does that hint at self-awareness or rather at the expansion of room structures?

NITTKA: In the very first chapter of Louis Aragon's *La Mise à mort*, Alfred's, the protagonist's face disappears. He is standing in front of the mirror and he can't see himself anymore. The others do see him, of course. Nota bene the title of the first chapter of the book is *The Venetian Mirror*. In Venetian painting, e.g. Paris Bordone's works, the small hand mirrors often show nothing either, though it is cheeky to say «nothing», for they do reflect light and they show colour without any objects. Mirrors do not only remind us of transitoriness. They also stand for prudence, truth, haughtiness, lust and vanity. They are a kind of instrument of verification, and if that does not suffice you can make use of a microscope.

I should like to permit myself and the viewer not to regard themselves for once. Anyway, not there and at the very spot where you expect to meet yourself. Ideally this evokes dizziness. It's as if you were standing on the top of a tower and looking deep down. Depth attracts you and this is meant seriously although you do not have any suicidal intentions. We know this, don't we?

Apart from this, I often violate the rules of perspective, which results in a certain slanting view, as my critical friends often confirm. It's as if I saw the things I'm painting in a slightly slanting mirror. «Tell all the truth, but tell it slant» wrote the American poetress Emily Dickinson. In addition, I was relieved when – in your dissertation *Das unheimliche Heim* – I rediscovered Horace Lecoq de Boisbaudran's term of the «perspective de sentiment», which perhaps keeps me from correcting things too soon.

KRÄMER: From your point of view, how important is the emotionally loaded motif for the effect of your paintings?

NITTKA: It is the objects in my motifs that are loaded, and it is the kind of relation to each other: the furniture, the fabrics, the foot of a chair, an ancient house. I regard them as some materialized and unheard-of stories, which often are the first impulse on my way towards a painting. The objects surface is sensuously perceptible. They have been touched. In them or with them people have lived, and the traces of wear and tear become visible. People often sat in this armchair in the painting *Trois heures et demie I* (2016), and they are actually still sitting there.

KRÄMER: It's painters like Édouard Vuillard or Léon Spilliaert who come to my mind when I look at your paintings. What part do these artists play in your works?

NITTKA: I do know Spilliaert, but I'm not especially familiar with his works. There, the outside world is like an interior, the sea, the dark distance that opens, complete landscapes you cannot escape from. It seems to me and I remember that well: I have also been in his interiors, once.

Yet, Vuillard has been accompanying me for a long time, his soul which is looking at me so gently and affectionately. His figures are interwoven with the objects and they seem to become one with the mysteries they have emerged from. It's them which intrigue me. One of his paintings, which particularly fascinate me, is *Le mystère* from the year 1896. It is particular because much is concealed. Once the art historian Julius Meier-Graefe said so appropriately about Vuillard: «Properly understood, his stories cannot be told.» You seem to be safe in his rooms. Quite at leisure, you can fathom their depth. Again and again I am studying Vuillard's particular degree of abstraction in his early works. This freedom is a relief to me. In his late works he has taken quite a different way. Maybe he had to find support in reality a little, to find support in a period becoming more and more insecure. When you are afraid, do you become more and more precise? This is what I ask myself, too.

And here is another brilliant quotation, which I have kept back as a conclusion: «He who wants to love should take care!» This is what Guillaume de Lorris recommended as early as in the 13th century.

August 2017, Berlin



LE LIT, 2016, 28 x 36 cm, oil on canvas