

Marco Stanke »Harmless«

Laudation · Eichenmüllerhaus, Kunstverein Lemgo · 2022-05-08

Ladies and gentlemen, dear guests,

with great pleasure I am permitted to deliver a laudation for my dear friend, the painter Marco Stanke, and for the works of his that hang here.

Like any serious scholar in the humanities who takes her or his own trade seriously — as I do — I began my research on the town of Lemgo, until now largely unknown to me, on Wikipedia. Wikipedia immediately and willingly lists the famous daughters and sons of the town of Lemgo and right in third place, we find named:

The »Founder of Japanology« — Engelbert Kaempfer.

Now, I'd like to begin this laudation with an anecdote that won't quite match the Hanseatic pride felt in the explorer Engelbert Kaempfer. I'd like to begin with an anecdote about someone who, in this sense, represents the exact opposite of Engelbert Kaempfer; someone who did not explore Japan but overlooked it, someone who was such an anti-Kämpfer that the FBI at the time noted him on a list as »violently pacifist«.

The anecdote is about the German-Jewish writer Leonhard Frank. Leonhard Frank was a refugee fleeing the threats of the Third Reich. His personal escape route first led him criss-cross through all of Europe and finally across the Atlantic to the United States, where at some point and without much success he wrote for and in Hollywood.

And, on one late evening, so the anecdote has it, he is said to have been standing on a veranda during a small gathering, gazing wistfully out over the moonlit ocean. And longingly he lamented: »Over there lies Germany.«

And because Leonhard Frank was grieving at that moment so pitifully for his old homeland, none of the other guests present dared correct him. No one wanted to approach Leonhard Frank and put him right, but that sea before him was not in fact the Atlantic and that »over there« was not Europe; was not Germany. This »peaceful« ocean before him was the Pacific, and over there — was Japan.

Please keep this story of the uprooted Leonhard Frank in the back of your mind; I'll come back to it later.

But now I'd like to turn your attention — and there'll be time for it — I'd like to turn your attention to the rooms in which we find ourselves and with them to Marco Stanke's works.

Marco shows us here, in the Eichenmüllerhaus, many of his so-called »Parts«. Briefly put, a »Part« is a stretched canvas that, mostly painted monochromatically, gains its individuality through shape and colour.

To call a Part into being, Marco spends strictly timed workdays in his studio, planning, building, stretching, priming and painting with an almost anachronistic love of the craft. Watching Marco at work, one is almost tempted to say that there is a kind of affection, a form of parental self-surrender that Marco brings to his Parts and that leaves behind in them an autonomously alive, organic, materially high-grade quality.

It is important to stress that the Parts do not hang or stand before us as individual works; rather, many Parts together shape what Marco calls a »Collective«. The »Collective« constitutes the actual work, the piece proper, and, moreover, always communicates with the particular place in which it finds itself.

In relation to one another, in their compositional arrangement — in the correspondences, in the contrasts within the Collective — the Parts acquire most of their singularities or, in other words, their respective identities.

Formally this means that the large Parts appear large because the small Parts exist; the complicated Parts appear complicated because the simple Parts exist; the colourful Parts appear colourful because the monochrome and unpainted Parts exist, and so on.

This formal differentiation can, of course, also be translated in interpretation — for example, and if you like, into sociological or psychological vocabularies.

The Nuremberg professor of art history, Lars Blunck, recognises in Marco's Parts something he designates with the term »Radical Picturing«:

Marco's pictures, according to Blunck, belong to the rare painterly contributions that do not devote themselves to dissolving the boundaries of what is depicted, but to dissolving the boundaries of the image-carrier itself.

In this way, then, Marco's works raise the question of what precisely it is that makes a picture a picture.

However, quite apart from the formal particularities of the Parts, there resonates in them — between them — something that can only be put into words after the fact. In Marco's works there lies something that affects us before any linguistic treatment, before any reason-driven classification. Something that, in its vagueness, possesses a certain clarity, but which loses that clarity the moment we try to pin this imprecision down in words.

The curator Katharina Mayer puts it aptly: Marco's »Parts« refuse an "absolute pictorial statement."

And this refusal, this dwelling in the vague, brings us to the title of the present exhibition:

»Harmless« [»Ungefährlich«]

In private as well as in his works, Marco is repeatedly granted a particular wit. And this wit shows itself once more in this exhibition title »Ungefährlich«.

»Un-gefährlich«, »ungefähr-lich« can be read in at least two ways.

On the one hand, »un-gefährlich« (»not-dangerous«) can be understood as the negation of the adjective »gefährlich« (»dangerous«). The prefix »un-« turns the dangerous into the harmless, and with it these works into something we need not fear.

In this first sense, too, a connection can be drawn to Marco's works, and I hope Marco will forgive me for sharing a small confidence at this point.

In 2019 Marco had two visitors in his studio, whose names may be irrelevant to the story, but whose words, let it be said, do find an audience in the German art world.

In any case, Marco was asked where, really, there was any risk in his works, where the danger of failure revealed itself. Although the question was, in my view, posed somewhat without basis, Marco nevertheless found an apt and a furious answer.

Of all places, on the Universal Stage, the largest exhibition space in the Munich Haus der Kunst, Marco showed sculptures made from bundles of canvases, some of which were only spared from bursting by extremely tightened ratchet straps; others threatened to topple, still others practically collapsed in on themselves. For many visitors this was danger enough at the time: they kept a safety distance back then already, as we all did half a year later with Corona.

The real risk, however, Marco only took on after that exhibition: in his subsequent works he consciously took a stance against the question posed to him and thus against the interpretative authority of the two critics.

In this sense, then, the title of the exhibition can be read as a smiling commentary on his own work. Marco's art is un-gefährlich — harmless.

That leaves the second reading of the exhibition title:

The word »ungefährlich« can also be understood as the adverbial form of the adjective »ungefähr« (»approximate«). That is, in the sense of "I do something in an approximate way," not quite exactly, only in an approximation or almost; »ich tue etwas ungefähr-lich« — »I do something approximately-ly«.

In order, after all, to pay tribute to the Lemgo Japanologist Engelbert Kaempfer, one can name here an aesthetic concept, an ideal of beauty, that can be found precisely in Japanese art appreciation: the concept of »Wabi-Sabi«.

Wabi-Sabi finds beauty not in the overt — Wabi-Sabi prefers what is initially veiled, prefers ripeness. That can mean a moss-covered rock or a slightly rusted kettle. But Wabi-Sabi also prefers what is damaged already in the process of its making — for example, a vase that, because of carelessness, turned out wrong. Wabi-Sabi idealises a plainness, an imperfection, that nevertheless reveals all the charms of the beautiful to the »understanding person«.

Marco's Collective, too, serves the »understanding person« as such a screen — or, better, as such a projection body. For the Parts, too, seem to ripen from year to year: they gain in craftsmanship, possess new materials, new colours, sometimes a singular gesture in their painting or — obviously — ever new forms.

This increasing ripeness can also be recognised in allusions to things lived through, to things experienced: some of the Parts hang before us marked by existence, literally sawn into. Others show signs of exhaustion, of wear, or of inner surrender.

But increasing ripeness in Marco's Collective also means positive things: bright, cheerful colours, gestures of composure, gestures of support, hints of determination or even an appreciation of the refusal to perform, an appreciation of the playful.

Marco's pictures, in their ripeness, forgo the status of icons.

They don't want to fix what was, what is, or what shall be. Rather, they hint, they ask, and they remain in the approximate; they remain for us, quite simply: »approximately-ly«.

And that brings me back to my opening anecdote about Leonhard Frank, and thus to my thanks to you, Marco.

One must not confuse the appreciation of the approximate with disorientation. Whoever travels in an approximate direction is still travelling in a direction.

Marco draws, for me, and perhaps for you too, with his Collective, a map by means of which one can locate oneself and the others in this world.

For me, personally, Marco's Collective always also serves as a corrective.

Were I to stand today on that veranda in California, as Leonhard Frank did at the time. Were I to stand there so disoriented and wail »over there ...«, Marco would likely mutter quietly beside me in the same moment: "Don't know. Only approximately, right? But doesn't really matter either — we'll just drive for longer."

Marco, thank you so much for so often gazing into the distance with me, and thank you for the lovely, harmless detours we take together.

And, I hope in the spirit of all of us, thank you for the works shown here.

Even if our laureate tonight is called Marco Stanke, my praise and thanks also go to you, dear guests.

In times like these, in times in which we wait for a worldwide plague finally to loosen its grip on us, in times in which environmental catastrophes and nearby wars rotate through much too heavy news cycles, in times which blow wind into the dark sails of the pessimists — you stand here today, as optimists.

And optimists you must be — otherwise you would have stayed in bed this morning. Or at the very least you would not be taking part in this cultural event, which, as such, is always an investment in the future.

Many of you, as members of the Kunstverein Lemgo, have committed yourselves to fostering the cultural education of the general public and, to this end, the Eichenmüllerhaus.

And this Eichenmüllerhaus happens to stand in a town that — according to Wikipedia — does not have its own theatre, but does have a sponsorship of the Panzergrenadierbataillon 212.

Precisely for that reason I would like to thank you for your culture-supporting efforts, and I thank you for being here today.

Let Marco Stanke's Parts work on us, let us work on the Parts — and above all:

Let us remain harmless to one another.