



Lothar Hempel

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Lothar Hempel's exhibition 'Samstag Morgen, Zuckersumpf' (Saturday Morning, Sugar Swamp) has the slightly self-conscious, abandoned air that a stage gets when it's the interval and everyone's in the foyer. An ambient, wordless soundtrack fills the space; someone's diary is on the wall - it's the setting of a post-apocalyptic fairy-tale.

The upstairs gallery contains three large installations that look like sets dreamed up by a group of talented, momentarily absent children. This isn't a negative observation - they're playful and introspective, descriptive and curiously elusive in the way that children are when they invent their complicated, hermetic games. The titles are poetic, a little sad and almost mystical. Schwarze Ebbe, Heisse Flut (Black Ebb, Hot Flow, all works 1997), with its details drawn in Hempel's characteristic marker pen, is a multi-layered and illusionistic representation of the front of a shop. Its construction leads your eye through a strange round archway, to its doorway, above which is mysteriously written 'Paul Martin'. Das Kalte Bild (The Cold Image), is a more intense study of decay and depression - the collapsing facade of a house draped with string. Behind it, a projector shines a target onto the wall.

Hempel delights in contradiction. His scenario is a place where words confuse the objects they describe, stage sets are sculptures and the audience inadvertently become the actors. A Clear Almost Singing Voice is a tall, flat and silent plywood cut out of a head and shoulders, its details rendered again with a marker pen and punctuated with a single, glowing eye. The light casts a greenish, supernatural glow onto the wall directly behind it. At the back of the head is a shelf, a couple of photos of a landscape, and a light. A narrative written in diary form (black words, yellow paper) and stuck to the wall gives an indication of what is going on, for example - Friday: 'if we close our eyes now, the pictures and events of the last few days run like a film in front of our inner eye'. This suggests a fictitious scenario, the enigmatic representation of human survival after an unspecified disaster, as it follows a group of characters whose phases of development are marked by the stage sets, which include a number of images 'culled from everyday sources'.

It's more of a mental space than an actual one, a place not of mourning but of renewal - no corpse-littered background, but a gentle terrain for games, observations and reveries ('the sunsets have the most fantastic colours at the moment, the same as our dreams every night...') The origins of the titles is casually revealed in the diary: '...she smokes one Marlboro Light after the other, her hair is so blonde that it seems transparent, and she has got an incredible clear, almost singing voice', or 'Henry and Emily discovered a tiny, empty shop. It has the name 'Paul Martin' written on it...'. Although, however, a narrative rationale might be offered, a more precise or focused meaning is withheld. The green eye, the target, the string, all conspire to elude any except the most oblique or poetic justification. Random images occupy the gallery like the remnants of an accident or too hasty a departure. Atmosphere is privileged over explanation. Appropriately, the 'Zuckersumpf' of the show's title is a word invented by the artist to mean a 'moment of extreme freedom before an action is initiated, when all the options still appear to be open'.



If the upstairs space is a stage, then downstairs is an abandoned dressing room, filled with the intimate hints and props of someone else's journey or performance. The stairwell is draped with green and yellow muslin, like fragile fishing nets, while on one wall hang some delicate, obsessive, pencil drawings of hidden heads distorted on strings behind masks, a tree, a tightrope walker, a fisherman. Music drifts up the stairs from a small Walkman in the corner.

This evocation of a psychologically charged environment, a parallel development between images and written words, and the fusion of the 'real' world with an imaginary one is terrain familiar to Hempel. By positing the art work as analogous to a stage, the artist emphasises the flimsy structures of artifice that are integral to any form of representation. Luckily for us, it's a strategy that's a springboard, not a lecture - his work, for all its seriousness is a lot of fun. He asks that the viewer becomes both actor and spectator, someone who can negotiate and respond to a lack of direction, unexpected situations and non-linear narratives. His post-apocalyptic scenario puts forward art as just another power structure that might benefit from a little more uncertainty, chaos and catharsis. This might allow it to become more responsible to both states of reverie and day to day politics; to become, in a word, interactive. As the anonymous diary writer so aptly and enigmatically observes '...all the possible attitudes towards life seem to be connected with each other by a magnificent system of doors...'



JENNIFER HIGGIE

Jennifer Higgie is a writer who lives in London. Her book *The Mirror – Rebellion, Revolution and Resilience: 500 Years of Women's Self-Portraits* is published by Weidenfeld & Nicolson, and she is currently working on another – about women, art and the spirit world.

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