

## Lonesome under Palm Trees: Dreams of Subject Sovereignty in a Wetting Paradise

First perception: lush luminescence. NEON. A kind of glow one hasn't seen since the films by Wong Kar Wei, where during the crown-colonial countdown fragmented subjects marveled at the hybrid worlds between night and day in a dreamy and lost state. But the colorful shining here is not the same. Vlaschits' neon is monochrome, sometimes even pastel colored and barricades itself inside acrylic surfaces instead of carving gradient depths in the celluloid. It is not, however, simply a question of materiality. Vlaschits' neon's pallet can certainly be compared to the sun blockers from the 1986 skiing season that alluringly smelled like coconut oil. Two Californian surfers disliked the white zinc creamed faces in the white snowy landscapes on one of their skiing excursions, unceremoniously invented an alternative and thus created an aesthetic that, for a last time waving goodbye, extolled New Wave's love for geometrical shapes and extreme abstraction, this time on the color field - and on the ski slope.

### The politics of color

Meanwhile we had actually seen it again, this neon. In a totally different field, it had conquered canvases and paper rolls. Consciously placed, delicate lines woven into neo-biological rhizomatic structures or architectural-utopian semi-Photoshop-environments: A trend in painting from the end of the 1990s. Born from the IT-hype, kicking-off sometime during the bursting Dotcom Bubble, carried on by the events of September 11 and fired-up once more by the global financial crisis of 2008. The Western world, shortly before being voluptuously pimped by information technology and now narcissistically aggrieved, was in a self-palpatation phase that was still full of cautious hopes, but working with craftman-like deliberation. Refinement had its cyclical comeback as a techno-antipodal sensuality. Omission was the insinuating gesture of free-floating phantasies.

But Vlaschits does not economize. Despite the reduced contours of comic-like fields, her paintings are not modest at all. She wants everything. Everything you can't get in real life. And this at best immediately:

Flowers grow - cocks stand - volcanoes explode. "Wetting-studies" produce pool landscapes growing into the space outside the canvas in sparkling installations. The palm trees are over-sized. The characters come to life. An ocean dream becomes accessible as a room-sized aquarium, just like the sphere of imagination it had emerged from. The drawings of the gay protagonists often look as if Ralf König's figures (which despite all the clumsiness always have a bit of eroticism) were having a threesome with Family Guy and a Keith Haring version of the little man in the *Be good to yourself* therapy book - gawky and full of ponderous and coarse desires. Still, the total scenario screams, "Here it is!!! Just for you!!! Take everything at once!!!" And suddenly it seems that the desire-driven figures have a look of non-self-induced contentment passing across their face.

#### Gay cocks as happy proxy feminism

"To me it is all about lonesomeness. It's about being all by yourself with all your horniness," says Marianne Vlaschits. Similar to the work of the artist Hans Bellmer, who was constantly accused of pornography and in whose bizarre images the public - even years after his defamation as a "degenerate artist" - only recognized a contemporary monstrosity, Vlaschits' paintings catch the eye with a large number of penises.

Behind the apparent emphasis on gay topics, however, there are autobiographical elements. "Of course I'm a total Fag Hag!" Marianne tells me in our conversation with a big grin. "But I clearly have to paint less dicks. Otherwise it will be misunderstood." Her gay circle of friends literally acts as a model - definitely also to her own desires. "There are already so many depictions of females, especially images of female nudes in art history," she says. "I wanted to change this. Sometimes I feel awkward when I notice what kinds of men are more interested in buying a painting when I do decide to paint women. So I have occasionally said 'No' to them." The latest Caribbean scenes therefore unfortunately do not reflect the indeed interesting constellation of older Western female aficionados and their young black Latin lovers. According to the artist, however, the reversal into a

typically male dominated version of sex tourism is as important a topic. By depicting it with a consciously exoticist gaze, she provokes controversies. Without aiming to legitimize the hierarchical relationships in prostitution, this examination of Eurocentric projections re-introduces her main topic: Unfulfilled Desires. “The problem is that the anticipated paradise never really comes true. So actually, although one sees all these picture-book tropical landscapes in my works, what I really paint is hell.”

The tears of the binary flat boys are dry

And yet the expressions on the faces of her figures imply something else: handsome sonny boys smile easily. Pink circle heads are grinning absently with their widely diffused teeth. Even remotely anthropomorphic melon-men seem as if they had just caught themselves in Caspar-Hauser-like surprise. In Vlaschits’ paintings a little of this paradise suddenly seems to become apparent. One might even believe a kind of agency could come about in the images that had been missing in the real world of the protagonists; that art helps us to gain the power to act, not solely interpreting (inner) worlds, but actually changing them.

Contemporary art loves to show faces lost in reverie in which the gap between the *actual* and *conceptual self*, namely between the subject de facto and expectations, between context and inner life, between a neoliberal everyday life and the need for poetics is addressed. But in such depleted cliché-artworks these levels of reality usually remain separated, do not merge into an action, rest as two detached foils on top of each other, uncovering the lack of genuine radicalism in the real life of the mostly quite conformist producers of these pictures.

This kind of separation does not exist in Vlaschits’ work. Also not in Hieronymus Bosch's work who places his little humans - maltreated by late medieval life - in infernal cooking pots while giving them non-involved to surprised and joyfully-anticipating expressions, as if they were actually bathing in an after-work wellness tub: Loving horror scenes serving as gentle artistic balm for the innocent soul - innocent as unaware of the extent of the tortures executed upon it.

The comparison with Bosch might at first seem bold considering the different technical elaboration of the paintings. Caution! Whoever paints in a two-dimensional look does not automatically have a two-dimensional way of thinking. “Most people think that if you paint colorful and apparently happy things, you must be stupid in a way and you can’t help doing it”, Marianne Vlaschits says, annoyed. Constantly needing to resolve this misconception seems to be the price for her consistent decision to use a basic pictorial language to represent in a self-ironic manner her desire for more simple solutions. And indeed, when I met Vlaschits in a seminar by the New York based artist and AIDS-activist Gregg Bordowitz, she mainly worked on delicate small black and white drawings that were impressive in their subtle combination of complex and conflicting situations with famous music lyrics. “If I told you things I did before/ Told you how I used to be/ Would you go along with someone like me?” were the lines of the song “Young Folks” by Peter Bjorn & John, the artistic adaption of which has especially stayed with me.

In this sense we may say, “Marianne, we know what you did before.” And we are eagerly anticipating the answer to the next question: “What will come after paradise?”

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