

Aliens, Teletubbies, and Other Beings that Are Not of This World

Jens Hanke's Series *Die Sonderschaft*

Strange beings, these Sonderschaftler (an term that could perhaps be translated as something like “eccentrolologists”) to which Jens Hanke has dedicated an extensive series of paintings and drawings. Not only the works themselves explore new terrain: the term as well, coined by the Berlin artist, also takes some getting used to, triggering associations like Sonderlinge (eccentrics) or Botschafter (ambassador, messenger). They are strange indeed, these artificial beings that come from Hanke's exorbitant fantasy. And their habitus, frontally directed at the beholder, standing at attention, their mouths often open as if calling out, giving the impression that they want to make a proclamation. What that proclamation might be is not revealed by the puzzling beings. The “eccentric club” that they belong to is a secret association of the “invincible,” according to Hanke, a brotherhood that acts beyond our categories of perception, as the artist writes in his foreword on this new series, “underway beyond time and space.” At the same time, he locates his species in the “synapsal swamps of perception,” making the mystery even more mysterious.

Statuary Presence

Let us focus first of all on what is visible: the oil paintings and charcoal drawings in a reddish shade of ochre, all done on paper with a color foundation, confront us with figures that seem like a cross of aliens and Teletubbies—beings of a virtually statuary presence, and yet somehow not of this world. Mask-like, symbolic, as a rule the heads with punched out eye cavities, backed by a gloriole of densely gathered lines. With massive bodies and short, compact, widely spread legs, they have planted themselves firmly, sometimes alone, sometimes in constellations of two. The dynamic that exudes from the Sonderschaften is increased by the pictures' backgrounds, which are frequently structured by a cascade of parallel lines. A further element that lends the composition tension is the repeated appearance of a large X, backing the figures like Andreas crosses (Trust me, I'm the good one here).

If Hanke's are dominated by the striking even jagged figures—examples include the works *The Jay* and *Tim Show*, *Decisions were made at a much higher level*, *The Networking Dudes*—now and again quieter representatives of the Sonderschaft genre surface: figures that are turned inwardly. The multi-perspectival head study *I didn't wanna leave my dream* even has a meditative character.

Flow of Inner Images

In his series *Die Sonderschaft*, Jens Hanke channels the flow of inner images that come to mind while drawing. Although he himself seems anything but esoteric, but rather likes to place himself solidly on the side of the grounded and pragmatic, his art leads directly into

a labyrinth of associations. Here, viewers encounter echoes of science fiction (Hanke was enduringly influenced by the books of Stanislav Lem), brain research, architecture, and technical drawings.

A primarily visual impulse is key here, full of surprises and disturbances. While some think around the corner, Jens Hanke, to modify the phrase somewhat, sees around the corner. And in this way takes up a challenge once issued by Jean Dubuffet: “The artwork, if it wants to free itself of conditioned thinking, has to be bold enough to pioneer the unthinkable, as absurd as that might seem. It is quite sure that our reason-based view leads to dead-ends and complaints, so let’s leave it aside, let us get our lungs accustomed to breathing the absurd.”

Jens Hanke stands in a tradition that can be ultimately traced all the way back to Francisco de Goya. *The Sleep of Reason Brings Forth Monsters*: this series of prints and drawings by the Spanish artist is considered the most famous example of an art that willingly follows the caprioles of invention, giving fleeting inspirations all the more thrilling contours on the visual surface the more strange they seem. Jens Hanke continues Goya’s surreal *Los Caprichos* tradition in a contemporary version; in works like *Dreaming of an Outside World*, and *I Didn’t Want to Leave My Dream*, the dark side of art is subtly embodied. The dream-like, we should note, is here meant in the sense of Goethe’s *Elective Affinities*, where we read: “I believe man only dreams so as not have to stop seeing.”

Precise Dreams

The—precisely sketched—dream-like character of the series *Die Sonderschaft* is also articulated in Hanke’s large landscapes (oil on canvas, 140 x 200 cm). Here, the colors are much more intense: in powerful shades of red, yellow, green, and blue the artist has a scene emerge that is shocking in that it couples the mold of romantic landscape painting with technical-constructive components. Like the debris from an airplane crash, sharp edged geometric elements jut out of a natural backdrop. It is no accident that Hanke’s crystalline landscapes are reminiscent of Caspar David Friedrich’s painting *The Sea of Ice (The Wreck of Hope)*. After all, the artist did explore this key early work of romanticism years ago in an exhibition for its relevance to the present CDF reconfigured. In Hanke’s (deserted) landscapes, there is no echo of the ship covered by ice, which in Friedrich symbolizes the failure of humankind, in Hanke’s (deserted) landscapes. Having gotten off the road: the artist uses this motto to sum up his landscapes. Perhaps something of a platitude, but all the same true: only those who abandon worn out paths can discover something new—even if there’s a danger of getting lost now and again. In this sense, leaving the right path is a *conditio sine qua non* for all artistry. Jens Hanke fulfills this condition in any case.

Jörg Restorff

Translated by Brian Currid