

Renaud Regnery
What Power Art Thou?
28.04. - 10.06.2023

Fuck abstraction!

One can never emphasize enough how the studio is not a secluded place where the artist experiences solitude. On the contrary, it is an echo chamber, filled with the noises of the world, where all the fears, desires, and hopes of the artist are exacerbated, in tune with current times.

By using wallpaper as the starting point of his process, as he has been doing for the past fifteen years, Renaud Regnery introduces a very concrete element from the world – and let's be honest, a very trivial one. Designating wallpaper as a standardized and average aesthetic imposed on the masses, the artist pushes the bad taste of tapestry manufacturers to its limits. Using a situationist strategy, he disrupts decorative purposes and, by extension, also disrupts a certain order of the world. Subverting the image from the inside, he creates a sense of airiness, fantasy and, consequently, freedom.

The origin of the wallpapers is always of high importance for Renaud Regnery. Everything makes sense, everything is significant: the time and place of production expresses a precise economic, social, and even technical context that resonates in his work. In the past Regnery has worked with trompe-l'oeil wallcoverings, exuberant neo-geo decors, falsely exotic patterns and sometimes even coarse wallpapers. For this new endeavour he selected photo-realistic motifs: the source of this new series are the plentiful e-commerce sites that provide their customers with customized images to choose from in a database - the advanced stage of capitalism that claims to provide a unique and personalized product, where there is only a series of variations in production.

The act of selling any sort of image – including artworks – always involves a kind of pact between the seller and the client. One must "believe" in the image, one must adhere to it. However, in undermining these source images, Renaud Regnery precisely rebukes this belief and instead intensifies the deceptive aspect: the falseness of the image is evident, what one believes to see is not what one actually does see. This is also the vantage point for the so-called "riddles of Épinal", popular images of the nineteenth century in which a motif is hidden in another, carrying and perverting clichés. These images originated from the town of Épinal, the artist's birthplace, and this is certainly not a coincidence...

As we know, one never paints ex nihilo. This becomes even more evident when one draws on the seemingly endless resources of found images as Renaud Regnery does. In his working process, each technical operation – selecting, extracting, patching, gluing, covering, dissolving, sanding, lacquering, painting, etc. – takes on a political dimension. Each of these gestures refer to a (hi)story, are executed with tools and according to rules, responding to a symbolism, sometimes psychoanalytical. Adding or removing, for example, are two operations with diametrically opposed philosophies. Inverting or obliterating an image are also intellectually charged processes filled with meaning.

In the exhibition "What Power Art Thou?", the artist performs in his new paintings a seemingly unnatural graft of one image onto another. First comes the founding gesture of the painting, always the same one, which consists of applying wallpaper – here a rather sophisticated photographic decor, often reversed or haphazardly glued – onto the blank canvas. In a second step, the painting of an archetype is superimposed, taken from the artist's collections of motifs: a pig's head, clown shoes, a small dog, etc. Thus, two images are associated in the paintings of this series, following an extremely polarized dialectic, a dramatized mise-en-scène, voluntarily overplayed. The association among them is more free than narrative, seeking stridency, chaos, even destructiveness. And if this collection and juxtaposition of images bear violence then it is because this violence can be found out in the world.

These visual sabotages are not afraid of being "silly" – a trait already found in the “enfants terribles” of German painting, the Junge Wilde or Neue Wilde. In their grotesqueness these images reject good taste. But despite being figurative, they remain elusive in their meaning and are no less subject to interpretation than so-called abstract paintings.

In this new body of work Renaud Regnery opens up various paths to explore. For instance, take "Durst ist schlimmer als Heimweh" ("Thirst is worse than homesickness"). The phrase is already fiendishly strange in its initial context – inscribed on the facade of the Hofbräuhaus, one of Munich's most famous breweries – but when transplanted onto a pasteboard backdrop of an imperial intergalactic war, no one knows what to understand anymore. In the context of the mass displacement of refugees and unprecedented migration movements, in a hygienist and moralizing climate that condemns any form of unrestraint, extolling thirst as superior to homesickness could even seem dubious. Is it a manipulation of images to better comment on the manipulations of ideas?

Elsewhere, equally ideologically imbued images are used: “virile” images of cars, flames, caricatures of witches on brooms. What do these prosaic and alluring images say about the era? What desire lies in these images? Renaud Regnery takes the risk of touching this vile and flammable material, he even makes it a stance: by moving images from one sphere of existence to another, he further blurs the boundary between high and low culture – ultimately subverting the pictorial realm per se.

Another element in this exhibition demonstrates the internal logic and recurring obsessions from one exhibition to another: the placement of the paintings in the space, which are often independent of the walls. Renaud Regnery has made unconventional hanging his trademark. Following the teachings of Claude Parent – the great programmer of the oblique function and disruption in architecture – the artist defies habits and self-evident truths. The oversized formats of his new paintings act as partitions, closing the space from floor to ceiling and forcing the viewer to circumnavigate them. Showing the other side of the painting has the impudent effect of revealing the backstage of the decor, without taboos, even if it means desacralizing the work. And finally, it reveals the simplicity of the means and the usual artifices of the canvas: one sees the crossbars and wedges of the frame, the grain of the canvas, the title and the artist's signature.

To these "programmatic" collage paintings, a large-scale drawing is added that is much more spontaneous. It reveals another facet of Regnery's artistic practice. By abandoning any preconceived ideas or intentions, the artist allows forms to emerge and lets himself be possessed by them. Gradually, they transform into figures.

He reconnects with a practice started when he graduated from the Beaux-Arts, where painted black shapes, seemingly placed at random on a dark grey surface would transform into silhouettes. Although they are less precise than Goya's figures in "The Disasters of War," which Regnery often references, they are infused with the same movement and energy of despair. One cannot argue that, technically speaking, these recent charcoal drawings are the work of a painter. Due to the volatile nature of charcoal, the contour lines quickly give way to areas of shading, which betray the painterly nature of the artist's gesture – inevitably more free and wider than in a drawing.

When Renaud Regnery describes his images as an "armada of fetishes," he highlights the spirituality that accompanies his process – as a painter, you have to believe in your images! And never mind romanticism: in a productive and utilitarian world, the artist who lets his unconscious take over is a model of rare exception – to be encouraged, protected, listened to.

Laetitia Chauvin, April 2023

1 amongst others Elvira Bach, Werner Büttner, Günther Förg, Georg Herold, Leiko Ikemura, Martin Kippenberger, Albert Oehlen, Bettina Semmer ...