

Catastrophes in Sepia

On Uwe Wittwer's recent watercolours

All those adorable children on their rocking horses and their sleighs, with dolls, and with ribbons in their hair! And while father is returning from the day's ride, in the big house with its classicist gables mother has already set the table for afternoon tea while watching over the little one's sleep.

Those familiar with Uwe Wittwer's oeuvre might on first sight be disturbed by his latest watercolours. In contrast to the works he created in 2007, for example the battle scenes based on Paolo Uccello, or the sheets in his series 'Camp', with their depictions of soldiers' lives, these new watercolours, not least due to their small format, appear almost harmless. Only the faded palette, limited to black, white and sepia, seem to somehow not want to fit into the friendly picture. It is here where we might pause for the first time, wondering whether we have been fooled by Wittwer's strategy, or even far too easily and pleasantly have been led astray by it.

Analogy

Suddenly we notice the other motives among this wall-to-wall installation of small-format sheets, the ones that with their latent violence irritate or even disturb the idyll of pictures of children, Sunday bests and floral patterns: a slain deer, a man posing with a rifle, snippets of portraits of men in uniform, finally entire landscapes of debris.

This precarious mixture of private idyll and horror we already encountered in Wittwer's early works: for example in the small-format painting of 1993, Mutter und Sohn, resplendent on the wall behind the two family members mentioned in the title, there is a shotgun. The latter's function in the relationship between the two must of needs remain unclarified: is it a reminiscence of the father, absent at least in the painting itself, does it refer to the mother's Amazon-like character, or should it be understood as a reference to the son's passion – sublimating desires un-lived – for hunting?

In the painting at least its obvious function is to disturb the at any rate maybe only apparently peaceful get-together, through the compositionally brutal way in which it pierces the skulls of those depicted. In the 2000 painting simply entitled *Schiffe* the threateningly advancing naval fleet mutates, in the combination of the colours white and blue, in the reduction to silhouettes, into a mere ornament, of the kind that would not give us pause on a wallpaper or even on Meissner porcelain. This type of interweaving of idyllic and frightening motives and scenes is a common theme in Wittwer's work, as are motives such as impermanence (chandeliers, blossoms, fragile containers, etc.), and the house as a site of both everyday joys as well as private agony and catastrophes.

In terms of formal aspects, too, the most recent series of watercolours bears a family resemblance with earlier ones: from the start, the artist works with the appropriation of mostly anonymous paintings and templates from high art. In several of his earlier works, Wittwer in fact rendered visible within his own work the image preceding it. In each of the two 2004 paintings *Wandstück/Camp*, for example, he depicted a photograph pinned to a wall. Similarly, in the present series we are made aware of the existence of materials preceding the work of art through the tool of picture in picture, or through the cropping of motives. The negative-positive-reversal, too, appears throughout several of his works, for example in the compositions based on Pieter de Hooch, William Hogarth and Jean Baptiste Chardin from 2001 to 2003, where it serves as a means to render visible the act of transference. Finally, the calculated blurring is a trademark of many of Wittwer's paintings.

It is a sign of fictionalisation, one that interposes itself as a significant disturbance between the figurative motive and its immediate reception by the viewer. This figurative underdetermination also appeals to the viewer to approach the painting

with their own memories and associations. The present series is thus a summary of motives and characteristics of those preceding it.

However, Wittwer also goes beyond what has already been created: in the occasionally drastic assemblage of opposites already mentioned, the present sheets seem to announce the collapse of the idyll. This hunch is confirmed when we realise that all of them are based on photographs taken shortly before the expulsion from former Eastern Prussia.

Masking

This could lead us to believe that the photos serving as templates hail from Wittwer's private collection. His interest in this aspect of recent history, after all, might stem from the fact that his grandparents lived on a manor in the formerly Prussian province of Pomerania, as a result of which the images that Wittwer's father's stories evoked in the artist show a strong similarity with the templates used by the latter. Immediately we imagine how Wittwer acquired the photos, imagine the family history behind them, and what his resulting affective connection to these testaments of a past history might be – only to be once more deceived. For in reality, the templates – as in the case of *Monsoon*, the 2005 series of nearly 40 inkjet-prints based on photos from a private internet archive of American veterans – are borrowed from an internet-based archive of members of an Eastern Prussian territorial association.

This knowledge of the origin of the templates, then, allows the viewer to interpret Wittwer's watercolours and their combination: now the fact that the watercolours are in small-format seems to refer to those among the photographic templates that are as decrepit and in danger as the idyll they show. The black, white and sepia, as well as the often very thin application of paint are now no longer understood merely as referring to the mediated character of representation, but as an immediate consequence of the dichromatic nature

of the source material, as well as a metaphor for the impermanence and fading-away of the original memories and images. Just as the figurative underdetermination may now be seen as referring to the irretrievability of what is depicted, as well as to the impossibility, resulting from historical distance, of perceiving clearly the situation. Even the white colour that predominates in the sheets can now be understood as snow meaning of which shifts from one painting to another: in the many depictions of children and adults on sleighs it signifies harmless winter fun, while in those where we seem to perceive scenes of flight, it suddenly acquires the meaning of a deadly enemy.

To those with a knowledge of history, the depictions of children's dresses and Nazi uniforms, family gatherings and fields of debris eventually join up in an apparently coherent image of Eastern Prussia as an idyll that was fragile from the start; in this, the ambivalence that the images acquire in their transformation by Uwe Wittwer appears to be consistent with historical realities, as many of those displaced were indeed victims as well as perpetrators; after all, the upper stratum of society was a clique that was in large parts extremely sceptical of modernity and democracy, and which, through its belonging to or making deals with the extreme right, in no small part contributed to the collapse of the Weimar Republic and to the coming to power of National Socialism.

The ambivalence of Wittwer's paintings thus conforms to the image that the recently deceased Walter Kempowski, in his novel – based on his research of huge amounts of source materials in the context of his "Echolot"-project – *All for Nothing*, published in 2006, sketched of the population of the formerly German Eastern territories in the face of the threat of a front that was moving ever closer: caught between a partly forced will to 'hold out', an unrealistic and fatalistic trust in the capabilities of the government, and massive panic attacks.

Pictorial Research

In truth, though, historical research, let alone a sentimental cult of remembrance, hold only limited interest for Wittwer. As before, his primary aim is to call into question the image's status and transformation of meaning, as well as our relationship to it: do the templates he uses already contain signs of the impending catastrophe, or is it only us projecting this because of our knowledge – which is the result of historical hindsight? Are the online photographs still media of private remembrance, or are they already historical documents? And is the desire to store the photographs, or spread them through the web, only due to a sentimental impulse, or do these images of a past idyll today serve to underline a claim, however structured, in comparison to the contemporary situation?

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(Translation by Tadzio Müller)