

HELMUT HERBST : WIENER ZIMMER / THE BIG SLEEP

Our neighbors in Austria, and especially in Vienna, have always been able to surprise us in the realm of the visual arts. At that intersection of East, West, North and South, the collision of ethnic difference engendered a unique blend of cultural idiosyncrasies. At one time, the megalithic Austro-Hungarian Empire created a sense of political and cultural stability for its diverse people while developing its official identity against the backdrop of a baroquely flamboyant and omnipotent Catholicism. After World War I, and especially after the havoc wreaked by National Socialism, this identity crumbled rapidly. Divergent cultural perspectives developed: on the one hand, a stubborn conservatism at the core of all major political parties, on the other hand, a small but active circle of intellectuals who were critical as well as provocative. A similar situation arose in England, where traditional values were also being critiqued and opposed. Both societies have engendered art that is innovative, aggressive, and challenging. In Austria, it began with Hundertwasser's "Mold Manifesto against Rationalism in Architecture" (Verschimmerungsmanifest), Arnulf Rainer's overpaintings, and most notably with the Vienna Actionists of the Brus, Muehl and Nitsch circle who shocked the public with their provocative behavior and caused many scandals.

Groups that test the limits of public acceptance and tolerance typically evolve in stagnant societies. It is no wonder then that the feminist movement is firmly rooted and extremely outspoken in these countries. The newer Austrian art circles have spawned feminist artists like Maria Lassnig, Valie Export, Elke Krystufek and Ona B., all of whom quickly attained international acclaim. Their artistic approach shares common elements, i.e., directness, uncompromising honesty, analytical thinking, and the critique of antiquated mores. Where Elfriede Jelinek exposes patriarchy with merciless irony, Valie Export and Elke Krystufek make reference to the feminine by consciously using their own bodies. For example, Elke Krystufek created a performance piece out of her self-eroticism by masturbating in the bathtub in front of an audience. Ona B. does not go that far, but she does like to use her body as a medium for artistic expression, either as a nude or a seductively shrouded female figure.

Nakedness, being undressed or showing one's nakedness, is an archaic act as well as one of exhibitionistic Narcissism, and it appears remarkably often in newer Austrian art. The desire to break down Catholic prudery toward sexuality could be the motivating factor. However, it is only partially true for Ona B. By using her body as an element in her art installations, she demonstrates that it is part of a whole which encompasses everything we are capable of perceiving. Consequently the individual has no special status. Rather, it is depersonalized and blends into the surroundings, dissolved into painting. Ona B. chose the use of red as an artistic paradigm and to emphasize her view of the individual. She surrounds herself almost exclusively with red, from clothes and body paint to wall canvasses and painted furniture. Although on traditional canvas, her painting is not illusionist mural art, but rather three-dimensional art installations that project beyond the canvas surface onto the furniture, pillows, and other objects in the room. This has the effect of integrating the painting into the surrounding room. Baroque painting deploys a similar spatial conceptualization, which also seems to reach out into its surroundings. Thus Ona B. uses traditional representations, but she fills them with a new content and her own imaginary world. Despite the associations that observers might make, Ona B.'s world nonetheless remains intangible. She prefers the color red because for her, it represents certain concepts like energy and passion, elements like blood, fire, and sun, or feelings like love and longing for the infinite. Observers cannot help but allow themselves to be engulfed by this orgy of red. It affects them powerfully, makes them react emotionally. Confronted with this world of red, a new awareness is opened up. The artist uses her own self in a kind of experiment: nude and painted red, she takes part in and becomes part of her created paint-world. Ona B. is artist to the core. She was never interested in anything else. Painting is her life, and eccentric or extravagant as it may sound, she is a personification of painting. She never uses her civil name, only the pseudonym Ona B. In Japanese, Ona means woman, thus Ms. B. It is an anonymous name, bizarrely Kafkaesque, like Mr. K. By renouncing a family name, the artist consciously removes herself from a given family genealogy and immerses herself in the universal. Her Japanese name also represents her connection to a Zen Buddhist lifestyle. A ritualized control of the body directs the creative movement of mind and soul. Strict asceticism and intense concentration are counterbalanced by explosions of energy that transpose a strong creative tension between contrasting concepts. Whoever has seen Japanese Zen calligraphers at work knows what I mean. This same principle is also inherent in Asian martial arts, especially in Kyudo – the art of archery - which Ona B. practices. Here, the large red dress in the artist's series

"Dressed to kill" must be mentioned: Ona B., wrapped in the enormous dress, is practicing Kyudo. Over and over again, the artist uses that dress and other objects – a painted couch and chair, glass balls, shoes, and a rowing shell - in indoor and outdoor art installations, rearranging them to create new contexts and images. Although tangible objects, they seem to stem from a kind of incomprehensible dream-world, while at the same time unearthing unconscious emotions. Like in a dream, we recognize seemingly unconnected things. Our senses perceive the combination of objects, which evokes strong emotions and alienation. Pulsing, wild, passionate and sensually charged, these arrangements allow a dream-world to take shape without interference from convention or the objective world. Because this process is not instantaneous but gradual, the effect is stronger. Take the example of the red dress, which symbolizes contrast: it dominates the room, seems menacingly severe and yet nurturing at the same time. For a long time, Ona B. was unaware of her reasons for making this dress. A possible explanation only recently dawned on her: she realized that the oversized dress reminded her of her grandmother, who had been dominating and powerful, but also very loving. This contrast is expressed in the dress: an absolute authority coupled with a kind of Madonna figure whose open mantle offers shelter to the needy. The dress could even be reminiscent of the Empress Maria Theresia who is supposed to have embodied these characteristics. This method is typical of the way Ona B. thinks and works. She uses a variety of iconographic forms in new contexts, with an undertone of irony.

The arrangement "The Big Sleep" (Wiener Zimmer) consists of two related environments that represent a view of the Viennese physician Sigmund Freud, the founder of psychoanalysis and author of "The Interpretation of Dreams". In Room 5, Ona B. has erected a kind of waiting room, with a red couch, a red side table with two red drinking glasses, and a red coat stand with a newspaper clamp. Facing the couch are four canvasses hung in a square formation.

The "Examination Room" (Behandlungszimmer) is in Room 4. Four red chairs have been arranged in a circle, as if for a therapy session; they regard each other in silence. This room is surrounded by a red Nepalese temple curtain that lends it an aura of the sacred. The observer becomes a silent therapist. In the same way that dreams are expressed in symbolic images, art transforms reality into spontaneous symbols that are not immediately understood. Only analysis can lead to an understanding that simultaneously reveals the unknown in ourselves. We are moved, frightened, and fascinated by what Ona B. allows us to become. No taboos, no convention, only the life force with all its ups and downs, heavens and hells, and its invincible will to live.

Seeing her at work, it is obvious that painting is her life's expression. She paints the canvas or object in a trance-like state, almost as if something had taken possession of her, using her as a medium. This somewhat mechanical stance allows the artist to candidly create order out of originally chaotic colors, opting for fiery, passionate shades of red. One series is appropriately called "Burning Wave" (Lohende Woge). Does this portray the vision of a purging fire, a paradise without beginning and end, without joy and sadness, success and failure? We can only sense it, never know for sure. And that is fortunate, since mystery is necessary for survival.