

Painting as the Victor in the Rivalry of the Arts

Sibylle Springer's *20 Blicke* (20 Views) series focuses on several works in the history of art from the sixteenth century to the present. The highly diverse "models"—paintings, sculptures, and photographs—all depict themes and motifs of Christian iconography. While the artist refers to her works as "reiterations" (*Wiederholungen*), they are still distinct enough from the models that we would not mistake one for the other, as would be the case with well-made forgeries or faithful copies. In *20 Blicke*, the motifs of the original paintings seem to have been laid out on the canvas more or less clearly, only to disappear behind a layered texture of delicately nuanced brushstrokes that are occasionally concentrated in gestural lines, leaving the motifs almost unrecognizable. The range of colors in several pictures in the series is rather subdued, to the degree that they almost create the impression of a grisaille painting.

Sibylle Springer's treatment of the models could be called appropriation, or reinterpretation. But what are her criteria for choosing the works? Of the broad field of Christian iconography, she prefers individual figures or biblical scenes in which violence is displayed or religious fervor extends beyond the boundaries of Christian morality and is transformed into physical and sexual passion.

One of the works in the *20 Blicke* series is based on Artemisia Gentileschi's depiction from 1610 of Judith beheading Holofernes. Gentileschi's painting is a more drastic representation than any other version by a male painter. In Sibylle Springer's adaptation of the painting, the physical violence appears to have been translated into an orgy of colors melting into each other, formally integrating details like the splashing of blood, but behind these colors, we can make out only outlines of the figures.

As in many other works in the *20 Blicke* series, the events depicted here have been rendered virtually unrecognizable, while at the same time Springer's style of painting seems to expose levels that are located just below the manifest surface. What was hidden often seems to come to the fore, just as x-ray photographs of paintings reveal a preliminary drawing, or parts that have been painted over.

Her picture based on Gian Lorenzo Bernini's *Ecstasy of Saint Teresa* is characterized by beams of light penetrating the picture from above. This marble sculptural group created by Bernini around 1650 and located in Santa Maria della Vittoria in Rome is the most famous representation of the vision described by the Spanish mystic Teresa de Ávila in the sixteenth century. She was visited by an angel who plunged an arrow deep into her heart several times: "The pain was so great that it made me moan; And yet so surpassing was the sweetness of this excessive pain that I could not wish to be rid of it."

Both this description and Bernini's sculpture have often been interpreted as a euphemism for sexual intercourse. The angel's arrow is also a direct reminder of Cupid's arrow and heavenly and earthly love seem to merge seamlessly into one another, while in Sibylle Springer's painting, the bodies, or rather the hard material of the marble, dissolve in an all-permeating, perhaps even godly light.

The ambivalence between lust and pain in the symbolism of (Cupid's) arrow appears again in another picture in the series whose theme is the martyrdom of Saint Sebastian. In this

picture, Sibylle Springer relies on a contemporary depiction of the saint by the painter Hernan Bas, an artist from Detroit. Bas's picture shows Saint Sebastian in front of a tree in an apocalyptic landscape, the arrows piercing the air like lightning bolts.

As in most historical representations, Saint Sebastian is almost completely naked in Bas's painting and seems rather to be writhing than contorted in pain. In addition to his "official" function for the church as a patron saint, the gay community has also adopted him as their patron saint. In Sibylle Springer's "reiteration," tall waves are descending on the saint in place of pointed arrows. We also have to look twice to recognize him as the center of the picture, which is possibly a further analogy to the sound waves in which Richard Wagner enshrouds Isolde's "love-death" (*Liebestod*).

As with Sibylle Springer's work in general, the *20 Blicke* series continually evoke associations to music. Her nuanced brushwork reminds us of Impressionism, an art movement that was clearly prevalent in painting as well as music. In 1944, the composer Olivier Messiaen, who had roots in French Impressionism, composed *Vingt regards sur l'enfant-Jésus* (20 Views on the Infant Jesus) in which he translated Christian iconography into music. In this enormous piano cycle, the individual notes are either delicately linked together or they rise in unison to form vigorous cascades—just like the brushstrokes and layers of color in Sibylle Springer's paintings.

Double layers are also created in her references to art history. When Sibylle Springer takes Cindy Sherman's photograph *Untitled No. 225* (1990) from her "History Portraits" series as a model, she simultaneously creates a reference to Sandro Botticelli. Although Sherman does not restage Botticelli's portrait of Simonetta Vespucci directly, she still interprets it somewhat freely and combines it with a particular way of depicting Mary: the *virgo lactans*, in which not only the child on her lap, but also one of her bare breasts is displayed. As in many of Sherman's self-portraits, in which she slips into a historic role and wears costumes, the breast is actually a prosthesis. Another of Sherman's photographs, *Untitled No. 216*, from the same series is an early reference to the most famous representation of the *virgo lactans*: the painting by Jean Fouquet from around 1450 that shows Agnès Sorel, the mistress of the French king, as the Madonna. (Incidentally, Simonetta Vespucci, who died young, was supposedly the lover of Giuliano de Medici.)

Fouquet's painting is also part of the *20 Blicke* series—in fact, Sibylle Springer used it as a model for her first picture in the series in 2011. The connection between these profane, highly eroticized ladies and the iconography of Mary transcends the historical boundaries of the repertoire of Christian motifs. That Sibylle Springer has made an adaptation of this is surely no accident.

The historical distance between Botticelli and Sherman seems to disappear behind the nuanced painterly structure in Springer's picture. The female figure in Cindy Sherman's photograph becomes only a shadow of herself, like an almost faded fresco. Sherman's contemporary adaptation of Botticelli's style, on the other hand, seems intensified, as if the picture is "painted back" to the Renaissance.

The same can be said of other adaptations of contemporary works by Sibylle Springer. In her painting based on Maurizio Cattelan's scandalous sculpture *The Ninth Hour*, in which the Pope is crushed by a meteorite, the very fact that the painting is based on this contemporary

naturalist sculpture, and not a representation of a saint from the Renaissance or the Baroque period, is not immediately clear. The models for the *20 Blicke* series are thus not only de-historicized (or re-historicized); through their mediality and materiality, they also become more or less absorbed by Springer's style of painting. Neither can we discern whether Springer's Sherman picture is based on a staged photograph, nor is the difference between painting and sculpture apparent in the case of Gentileschi or Bernini merely by looking at Springer's paintings.

The *20 Blicke* series creates what in the mid-twentieth century André Malraux called an "imaginary museum." While Malraux's imaginary museum contained photographic reproductions, in Sibylle Springer's imaginary museum, photography has been replaced by painting as the medium that brings together various genres of artworks through unified formatting: the distinct gesture of merging colors into one another, which is more or less her signature. However, unlike an imaginary photography museum, or Google Images (which has since become the most obvious guide to finding even remote art historical material), the works that she has reproduced have not been reduced to the common small-scale format. Instead, the size of Springer's paintings matches the "originals" exactly with the exception of sculptures, for which she uses an approximate size.

Finally, Sibylle Springer's *20 Blicke* series is a daring attempt to revive the classic rivalry between the arts—a rivalry that initially raged between painting and sculpture, then painting and photography and that seems to have reached its historical ending point with Gerhard Richter, if not earlier. That art history and the venerable tradition of Christian pictorial motifs becomes secondary to her own painting style is, in a way, quite an act of insolence, although she artfully conceals this in the guise of putting her own work behind the models. Sibylle Springer does not care how many times painting has been declared dead; in the rivalry of the arts and pictorial media, it still has the ability to come out a winner.

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