

A story or two, the better to like Anke Doberauer's painting, or not

Holar is a small town in the north of Iceland. When I say "small town" I'm actually being quite optimistic. Let's call it a bunch of houses wedged together at the bottom of a valley, with a track for access. If my memory serves me right, Holar is the diocese in these parts, complete with belltower and church. People hereabouts breed horses. Population: a hundred souls or so, not more. When (if) you visit Iceland, and when (if) you stop at Holar, you sleep in the premises of the regional agricultural college. It's a spick and span, modern building that looks a bit like the kind of poorhouse or hospice where nobody is really that keen to end their days. Thus far, in a word, Holar doesn't exactly seem to be somewhere you'd want to head for.

Kadoka is in South Dakota. On the edge of the Bad Lands - a desert-like wilderness that was once a sea, thousands, no, more like millions of years ago. You come into Kadoka along its main street, which in fact contains the entire town. You get to Kadoka after an eight-hour drive, no matter what direction you arrive from. The street is a track lined with a handful of bars, a video club, an attorney's office and a "public" library. It ends at a railroad track used more for transporting grain than passengers. Kadoka must have a population of around fifty, in summer, when all the motels are open.

Thus far, in a word, Kadoka doesn't exactly seem to be somewhere you'd want to head for. What's worse, neither Holar nor Kadoka seem to be remotely interested in either understanding or appreciating Anke Doberauer's works. This is true, but not altogether.

So let's say you're spending a few days in Holar, with the Agricultural College as your refuge. In the hall, you'll come upon a series of portraits, a dozen or so, painted with oils. Either they're the various directors of the place in their official garb, or they're the various priests who've officiated in Holar church¹. These works certainly won't leave you with any unforgettable memory, enhanced by the virtuoso way they have been painted, but you will doubtless be exercised by the incongruous fact of their being there. This incongruousness is heightened by the anachronistic showing of classically executed pictures within an architecture that is devoid of quality and almost certainly prefabricated: white walls, indefinable neon lighting, and lino on the floor. The incongruousness is also associated with the idea that in the farthest flung corner of Iceland a burgeoning community has felt and still feels the desire to record its history by choosing, among other things, the most classical form of painting as the medium.

So let's say that you've chosen South Dakota as your destination, with a stopover in Kadoka, where you'll hasten to visit the Museum. The Museum is housed in the town's old railroad station and is, needless to say, devoted to Kadoka's history, as are, no doubt, thousands of other museums in thousands of other small towns of this ilk. In it, you will find photographs of the first families to settle in these parts, along with their clothes, their boots, their Sunday best, their tools, and their letters... Their History and their stories. You will also see a few pictures: of landscapes, of farms, of summer and winter, and one or two portraits bearing a very close resemblance to the photographs on view, in terms both of the way the subject is framed, and of the subject itself. Just as in Holar, it's not the quality of these works that will have an effect on you, but rather their very presence in this setting, coupled with the idea that one fine day, in the middle of nowhere, somebody made the decision to paint a picture. Why? Who for?

In 1992, when I came across Anke Doberauer's paintings for the first time in her Marseilles studio², my first reaction was to think that it was definitely not going to be terribly interesting: painting, and figurative painting, to boot, juggling with old themes to further aggravate the situation of classical models. As it so happened, both during and after my studio visit, the nature of her work definitely interested me more than I cared to admit. I would have to

¹ In this church you can see a mosaic made by the painter Erro in 1957, when he was still called Ferro.

² At that time, Anke Doberauer was a post-graduate student at the Marseille-Luminy School of Fine Art.

step beyond the guilty conscience caused by the fact that this category of painting could still, and again, hold my attention.

Questions were subsequently raised of the sort that art historians are fond of: the search for antecedents, the summoning up of great classical models... Who out of Watteau, Christian Schad, Barnett Newman and Gerhard Richter was best able to offer information about the activities of an artist who paints, and who, or so I think, doesn't have a whole lot to do with this genealogy. The issue was likewise raised about the relationship between model and painter, subject and object... All questions which give me to think, today, that this line of thought was more academic than pictures that I wanted to strip of any academicism, which was more something to do with me than something that informed the pictures. And it was definitely the artist who was laughing, well aware that she had snared me and others. By dint of visiting museums, you will definitely be persuaded in the end that works of art hail from museums. No, where applicable, they are, or will be, headed for museums. And in the best-case scenario, they are made up of experiences - and experiments - that are not fettered by the shackles of art history.

A few years later, when I happened to be leafing through an Anke Doberauer catalogue³, great painting, the grand style and museum-oriented references - all in reality excuses - receded and took a back seat, and with them, of course, my guilty conscience. Maybe living a long way from everything⁴ relaxes the way you see things. Perhaps showing and looking at painting is less problematic these days? Perhaps it's the quality of these pictures which captures different stories, and then, of course, our History. So the picture is the equivalent of an oral tradition.

Looking at these full-length portraits, staring straight out at the viewer, I'm actually less keen, in the end of the day, to see pictures, than I am to see Djamel, Sayed, Leo, Mounir, Felix and Michel.⁵ For me, the mere fact of uttering these first names calls to mind a private kind of experience. An experience that connects the models to the artist and which, in many instances, arises from just chance encounters. If this story remains untold⁶, on the other hand, the series of pictures has plenty to say about the way the artist works out her relationship with the model. This relationship seems to be exclusive, upfront and demanding. The models appear to be provoked rather than guided. The pictures don't show a pose, but the sophistication of a relationship between two people. Show me where and how far you want to go, and can go. And the question is put by a woman to exclusively male models. It is no longer a matter of hijacking pictorial models. It is no longer a matter of depicting man the way art history depicts woman. What is involved here is the subversion of a model of human relationships in a society where, if you'll forgive me for waxing commonplace, masculinity is winning out over femininity.

The pictures therefore show a power play in which, in effect, the model is frozen just when he appears to be most vulnerable.

This is how it is with Djamel (1993), an anonymous figure, opening his fly and showing his penis; confidently displaying the flipside of our weaknesses.⁷

The series titled Acht Magnifizenzen which Anke Doberauer produced in 1997 deals in a certain way with the weakness of History, and with our weakness when it comes to assuming responsibility for our History. The University of Jena (Germany) commissioned Anke Doberauer to paint the portraits of the university's different directors from 1939 to the pre-

³ Anke Doberauer, *Acht Magnifizenzen*, Kunsthistorisches Seminar Jena, Druckhaus Gera, 1997.

⁴ Minneapolis, Minnesota.

⁵ Each first name is the title of a work.

⁶ The viewer thus turns into a peeping tom and it's what remains invisible that excites us.

⁷ At the time of this writing [1998], America is realizing that it has spent seven whole months being fascinated by its president, who couldn't resist the temptation to unzip his fly. The most powerful man in the world has shown himself up to be as vulnerable as you or I, when confronted by the charms of a young female employee. In the end, it's all rather comforting.

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sent day. The visual solution she adopted was a classical one: half-length, bust portraits, "figure 25".

Six wear the traditional attire of the University. Two of them, the most recent ⁸, face the viewer, clutching the symbols of their respective specialities. Four are painted from behind—back views. They are all deceased. Their successors represent them, from behind, all dressed up, sporting the photo of their ancestors. The first photo, of the director who held office from 1939 to 1945, is that of a man in Nazi uniform.

The directors holding office from 1983 to 1989, and from 1989 to 1990 are in city suits. Because Jena was then in former East Germany, it was forbidden to wear traditional dress. So the series was as classical as you can get, but it still caused a stir. The pictures were almost banned from being shown by a Germany that is having a great deal of trouble mourning its history, be it bygone or recent. Eight pictures introduced a power play, less between the artist or Jena University and Germany, then between one Germany and another Germany.

Looking at Anke Doberauer's works today, the way they can disconcert you takes me aback. Their violence is cold and polished, the way the films of the Austrian Michael Haneke ⁹ can be. Both seem to share this capacity to suggest History by way of stories that pull no punches.

Stories like the ones we know at Holar and Kadoka, but which are certainly not easy to tell.

Text by Philippe Vergne
Translated by Simon Pleasance

⁸ Director from 1990 to 1993; Director from 1993.

⁹ Michael Haneke is the author of Benny's Video, among other works.