

monopol

**Gabriel Proedl In Conversation With Hausner-Sisters (Xenia, Jessica and Tanja Hausner)**

Xenia Hausner, all around us here in your studio there are huge paintings. On one of them, two and a half by three and a half meters, I see a scene where people are waving from a train compartment. Directly next to the painting there's a life-size model of that compartment. Take us through your process.

XH – First I build the model. Then I invite my actors to the studio and photograph them in various poses – better said: situations. Usually, a strict graphic story results from the improvisations in the photos which we put together. Then I grab for my paint brush.

**You don't paint directly from a photo?**

XH – No. People who are more economical sometimes ask me why I work in such a roundabout way. But I need this *live* moment. I can spend hours in the mountains and valleys of a person's face. Photos don't have the same effect.

JH – The Austrian artist André Heller once said that Xenia stares things to death. There's something to that.

XH – It's almost like touching the person across from me.

**Your models have an unusually intensive look. How do you find them?**

XH – They are usually art students or actors. Most important, they have to have interesting qualities. Whoever works with me in the studio gets painted. Sometimes I ask Jessica. She's right at the source.

JH – When doing casting, I sometimes ask the actors to dance or to eat something. That's not so easy.

XH – Is it difficult to eat in front of a camera?

JH – Yes. Eating and dancing tell a lot about a person because they are activities you can't consciously keep under control. And it's not easy to stay natural when you feel like you are being observed by a camera. Sometimes I ask actors to count off names or something else in their heads. That helps.

**You fuel each other...?**

TH – We generally work well together. Jessica and I especially intensively. I make the costumes for her films.

JH – Tanja is the inspiration for many of my figures. In a sense, I experienced much of my childhood through her. Recently I found some old diary entries of mine. I write: “Tanja has a piano lesson today. Tomorrow Tanja has a German test.”

TH – I recognize the similarity to me in a lot of your figures. Often my quirks come to the surface.

**Likewise, the colorfulness in Xenia Hausner’s paintings and in Jessica Hausner’s films are similar.**

XH – In a certain way we complement each other in our tendencies. Jessica is a director who is very focused on the aesthetics of images. Her films are painterly. And my paintings start off with staged photography – with a still from a film.

**In a family where art was always in focus, was there any competition among you like in some of the great acting dynasties?**

TH – Maybe competition doesn’t sound right. But we look over each other’s shoulders. I would say we spur each other on.

JH – Exactly. We need each other. Twenty years ago, Tanja and I were really at loggerheads so that I wound up doing a few short films with someone else. Finally, I got terribly distraught because I can’t work without Tanja. I swore I’d never again fight with her again like that.

XH – I can understand that well. There’s an intimacy in working together. Every kind of craziness has to be possible.

**To reach a kind of high?**

XH – High sounds to romantic to me. It’s more like a rhythm. For me shutting the door and working alone is a great adventure. It’s really liberating to be thrown back on yourself.

**Your retrospective at the Albertina is called “True Lies”. How do you intend to approach the truth through lies?**

XH – In my opinion it’s easier to understand the world through an intentional fiction. In my case “True Lies” refers only to the staging – but in truth every narrative artwork is a “true lie”. The truth by itself is trivial or leads to a documentary; and a lie by itself leads to kitsch. Who would have thought that Arnold Schwarzenegger would have said something so groundbreaking about art?

**You mean it's not possible to comprehend reality better just by observing it?**

XH – You understand more of the world by seeing it filtered through art. You can understand everything. The subjective gaze of a painter as he or she takes in the world outside. Yes, and it's no different in literature. You can see all that at the moment in the discussion about "Eurotrash" by Kracht – what is true and what is false.

**In your films too, Jessica Hausner, the lie takes on an important role. Where's the kick?**

JH – In life people lie most of the time. They assume various roles and play differing versions of themselves. I am not condemning that morally. On the contrary. If we always told the truth our system would collapse.

TH – "Look for the blunder" is our favorite game. I just got a contract to do a historical film. Every costume has to have some flaw and is not supposed to look attractive. This way we want to prevent some surface truth from turning concrete.

XH – Yes, this contradiction interests us, pursuing some mysterious grey zone, ambiguity in fragments.

**Is this pursuit the reason you make art?**

XH – For me the motor is a childlike need just to paint. I open my eyes and study an eggcup to see if it's something worth turning into an image. Life is secondary to the work itself.

JH – Making art is an attempt for me to participate in life. If I stopped, I would drift away. I'm afraid of the void.

**Tanja Hausner, do you consider yourself an artist? Or are you as a costume designer a part of the service industry?**

TH – No, that would be a complete misunderstanding of my profession. By means of fabric I invent the biography an actor will slip into. I have my own style, my own aesthetic. I feel free in my creativity.

XH – And don't forget that close up in "Little Joe" when the collar point and the powder-colored crease appear on the screen with the red curl!

TH – Right, a thrilling moment!

**Before you became an independent artist, you worked as a stage designer in the theater. Did you give up this work because you often had to subordinate your ideas to those of the director?**

XH – It's not a question of subordination or superordination. The issue is being on the same wavelength. I wanted to translate the director's concept into spatial ideas. But finally, I weighed the alternatives: how many paintings did you not make while you were sitting in the theater cafeteria having a good time?

**So you were having too much fun at work? Was it not serious enough for you?**

XH – I had lots of fun. But I realized over time that the collective discussions were tiring me out and the whole business would wind up on the rubbish heap. I just couldn't take that. I'm too narcissistic for that.

**Does it interest you what becomes of your pictures when they leave your studio?**

XH – Of course, and I follow the process for as long as possible. Some pictures I want to keep or at least help with the decision about where they'll be going.

**In a recent interview David Hockney said he would love to buy back one of his most well-known works. Can you identify with that?**

XH – Totally.

**In order to own it?**

XH – In order to have it near me, yes. But not out of sentimentality. Sometimes people ask me if it's painful for me when a painting leaves my studio. No, that's the normal process, it's the way things work.

**When do you consider a piece of work ready for release?**

XH – Usually if something works right away, I don't trust the feeling. Sometimes I knock around with it for a while until I realize that I'm back at the start. At least I trust *that* feeling.

JH – It's a constant process of trying to get to the bottom of the matter. It's a baptism by fire when a work goes public. Then for the first time I see what really works and what doesn't.

**You screened your newest film, “Little Joe”, a number of times in front of test audiences before you went public.**

JH – Yes, we held a lot of screenings for “Little Joe” because we wanted to figure out how ambivalent the content was.

XH – What is a test audience, Jessica? Do you invite smart people?

JH – Usually people I know and whose opinions I value. Don’t you hold any test screenings?

XH – No. I think it’s fantastic that you’re interested in what all those people have to say. I’m not interested in something like that. At least not during the creative process. Afterwards I enjoy being surprised by the way people interpret the works.

**In early December, Jessica Hausner, you were appointed Professor of Directing at the Film Academy in Vienna. What excites you about this role?**

JH – Thinking about making films helps me make my own. A new generation of filmmakers is coming of age, and I like what I see. They come up with new subjects and talk with ease about touchy topics like sexual identity. I find that very exciting.

XH – We both share a love for the cinema. But film theaters have degenerated as an institution. Even before Corona it was pretty depressing to go see a film. These days I only do streaming.

**Jessica Hausner, doesn’t it hurt when even your own sister has stopped going to film theaters?**

JH – She stayed loyal to film theaters longer than I did. I’ve been streaming for years.

XH – I remember when we were kids that you liked going to the cinema more than to a museum.

TH – And you, Xenia, wanted to be an architect first and then a photographer. Finally, you became a set designer and painter who involves photos.

**Your father was Rudolf Hausner, the well-known painter and representative of the Vienna school of phantastic realism. He advised all of you against getting into art.**

XH – His road to success in the art world was hard and he wanted to spare his daughters from taking that stony path. At least that was the surface explanation.

JH – He was totally conservative and patriarchal and wanted something appropriately daughterly for his daughters.

**Still, you recall him fondly.**

XH – Ambivalently fondly. He was affectionate and caring but also threatening. At home we were always discussing art. We loved that.

JH – I still remember when we were in the museum, standing before “The Battle of Alexander at Issus” by Albrecht Altdorfer. He explained to me in detail how the painting was constructed. I liked that, the fact that pictures can tell stories.

**Jessica Hausner, you were a big Joseph Beuys fan when you were young. I suppose that was exactly the opposite of your father’s aesthetic position.**

JH – Absolutely! When I was fifteen or sixteen, Xenia gave me two huge Beuys catalogues as a present. Discussing him was a sure way to make my father mad. That kept us going for a few dinners. “Everybody can be an artist”. He thought that was completely crazy.

XH – I was in Berlin by then. When I’d come home to visit, I managed to stir up huge storms. I was pretty rebellious. Our discussions were strenuous.

**The fact that he discussed things with you means that he took you seriously.**

JH – Sure, but in his own way, I guess. He took us seriously, but he always had to be right.

TH – Sometimes he’d joke and call us “my sons”. That was an honor.

JH – Right, or “gentlemen”.

XH – Yes! And when I had problems at school, he would just say. “Xenia, be a man!”

**Six years after his death, Jessica Hausner, you made a film about a girl who murders her parents. Artistic patricide?**

JH – In those days most murderers in films were men and most victims women. I wanted to reverse the roles. While I was doing research at juvenile court, I stumbled on a young woman who had some parallels with me. She was a protected girl in a Catholic school who was raised in a solid middle-class home on the outskirts of Vienna. No one could understand why she suddenly killed her parents. This disparity interested me.

**You took the circuitous route through art?**

XH – The same goes for me with my piece “Headshot”.

**...an acrylic painting from 2004 in which you point a pistol at yourself with your finger on the trigger.**

XH – I didn't manage to pull the trigger. So I painted the scene and managed to save myself the trouble. Jessica didn't shoot her parents, and I didn't shoot myself. We were both saved by art. We were able to liberate ourselves through this circuitous route. That is a great privilege.

**How did you liberate yourself from your father, Xenia Hausner?**

XH – Basically through painting – a form of resistance that I executed to his amazement. In 1996, one year after his death, I managed to work through everything again thanks to a painting called *Liebestod* ("Love-Death"). The actor Peter Simonischek played the role of my dead father lying on a blue sofa. Tanja is sitting before him and mourning.

TH – When he died, I probably mourned over him the most. That's why I posed for the picture. Mine was the most authentic portrayal.

**Why Peter Simonischek? He doesn't resemble your father at all.**

XH – That's how you can see how "true" the "lie" is. He was very convincing playing the corpse. He was deader than dead. But actually, it doesn't matter who plays the role. People are always asking: "Who is that? Do I know her? Do I know him?" That really gets on your nerves. Then I say: "That shouldn't matter a bit. Do you like the picture or not?" I tend to stonewall when people start getting anecdotal. That's always dangerous in figurative painting.

**You also stonewall when people ask why you almost exclusively paint women.**

XH – No, not at all! My world is female. I portray a female parallel universe. A proleptic reversal of the role of power so to speak.

JH – The women you paint are no sweet things, nor are they bitches or saints the way they often are portrayed in traditional male art history.

XH – Women are just more presentable in art. They are more complicated, more contradictory, they can do more. In art they are more interesting as figures. In my paintings the women are the way I experience them today – their more critical.

**And full of yearning?**

XH – Yes – and that is a toxic cocktail.

**Toxic?**

XH – Strong and full of yearning at once. The feminist canon usually shows women as victims. I find this victim perspective uninteresting. I like the contradictions. Maybe I'm a little out of line.

**You know the rules as they are, but you reject them.**

JH – Back when you were in Berlin, it was the big world. Visiting you there was very important for me. Shortly after the Berlin Wall fell, you said, "Come, Jessica, let's get on the suburban train at Zoo and head east."

XH – I was there when the Berlin Wall fell. I saw all the people streaming out of the suburban line at Ku'damm. A couple of teenagers asked for a coin. Then they went to a phone booth and made a call: "Hey Grandma I'm on the Ku'damm!" We cried. East Berlin looked so different. It had atmosphere. It was like Vienna in the 1950's.

**Do you miss the Vienna of the 1950's?**

XH – On the contrary! I'm happy it's no longer such a sleepy place. Vienna has an urban feel today. I like being in Vienna – and not because everyone is so nice to me here.

**How do you mean that?**

XH – Somehow, I trigger controversies. I don't know why. Maybe because I look so boringly middle-class. Or maybe I'm just controversial, and people can't pigeonhole me.

**Since the beginning the Crisis, you haven't been in Berlin. You commute between your studio in Vienna and Traunkirchen at Traunsee. Do you miss the down-and-dirty big city?**

XH – And how. I can hardly wait to get back to Berlin. But it will be a different world when the Crisis is over. We won't be doing all those huggy-kissy greetings like people do in Vienna.

JH – I always hated that.

**Keeping distance is perfect for you?**

JH – No, not like that, but basically, I'm a shy person, something I've had to overcome for professional reasons. Even now, I have difficulties opening up to people.



TH – I'm pretty much the same way. I also tend to be reserved. I have had to overcome that for costume fittings with actors.

XH – I can understand. When too many people are posing in my studio, that really drains me.

JH – But a positive way of formulating shyness is to say that you're good at keeping busy by yourself.

**Xenia Hausner, when will the Crisis find its way into your work?**

XH – My work always depicts crises. I have been constantly preparing myself for the ultimate Crisis.

(trans. P.J. Blumenthal)