

WELTKUNST

Sebastian Strenger in conversation with Xenia Hausner

“My radicalism needs to take place in painting!”

Before she turned to painting, Xenia Hausner worked as a set designer in London, Vienna and Salzburg. And then, once again, at the beginning of 2020, she performed brilliantly in this field at the State Opera, Unter den Linden, in Berlin, where André Heller was celebrating his debut in the world of opera with a performance of “Der Rosenkavalier”. The artist, now 70, has always pursued an innovative, headstrong course. Sometimes she finds her ideas at junkyards and garbage dumps. And thanks to her vigorous interpersonal contrasts, her paintings achieve their characteristic uniqueness. The Albertina in Vienna is currently devoting a comprehensive retrospective to her works. Our author, Sebastian C. Strenger, visited Xenia Hausner at her studio in Vienna, which is located in the former “Austria – Alpine Milk Headquarters”, and immersed there into her cosmos.

What points of reference in the history of art are important for you? What especially impresses you?

In the course of my life as a person with a thirst for learning, I have always felt attracted to paintings that are very different from my own – like those of (Cy) Twombly or (Mark) Rothko. Mainly because my paintings have areas of open space, and I consciously allow for coarseness and incompleteness or unfinished forms. I love primitiveness in painting. Some faces are executed carefully, but there are also long, open stretches in a painting where extensive, direct painting intentionally takes place. When people ask me about painters: well, sure, Lucian Freud paints fantastic portraits, but I’m somewhere else. With (Edward) Hopper for example I’m into the colors and the loneliness. Among the more recent painters someone like Adrian Ghenie is exciting to me. He’s got a vitality like (Francis) Bacon and a Bacon destructiveness in his pictures, and, well, something very irrationally spontaneous. And that interests me.

In his works the destruction of a figure is an important subject...and for you?

That can happen, but with him, when you come down to it, destruction is what he’s about. For me destruction occurs in the forefront, during the working process. Uninterrupted destruction and reconstruction, you might say. That’s how I tick. But what we finally see in a picture is something else. For Bacon and Ghenie at the end of the day destruction is an aesthetic principle. I think that’s great.

And what do you say to those who describe your work as “stain painting”?

Who cares! That’s the way it is. That’s how I paint. Painting is always changing and moving into some other direction. But I have nothing to say about that. It’s nothing I want to analyze. That’s like trying to scoop up some internal magma to a rational level. It all needs to stay in the dark.

What would you paint if it were your last painting?

I think I would take something very trivial and try to paint it radically. Maybe something like a switch or some coupling or some other everyday thing. What counts is the vitality of the execution.

Looking back, do any weird things come to mind?

I was in China a lot. For example, I had an exhibition at the Shanghai Art Museum— paintings of redhaired, black-haired, blond female figures. We went through the exhibition with the mayor at the vernissage, and he said: “Very interesting. All self-portraits?” That’s funny because you can understand that they can’t decipher our faces as individuals either. After you’ve been there for a while, your eyes grow accustomed, and you can read every face individually. And naturally he asked right away – and this is why I am telling this – : “Why don’t you paint Chinese people?” And I said: “Good idea.”

And...?

It took a few years. First, I made a lot of photos. I like doing that. It’s like collecting fabrics, like an index card catalogue. Like having a stock of all kinds of things –cables, tubes or manhole covers – you name it. All those forms interest me.

Are photos just ancillary resources?

Yes and no. They often become components of a work and transmute into a new context, even if there is some shift in context. Three years later, I had an exhibition, “Look left, look right”. It was based on the principle of dialogue. Asian and Western people contrasted. Some of the paintings from that series are in the Albertina.

Have your eyes as a painter always been focused on Asia or is your perspective shaped by European or American painting?

I don’t look in any particular direction. My eyes gets hooked on anything that excites me. I’m interested in art and painting, airshafts and twisted cables, transformers and whatever other fascinating thing life has to offer. Also, it’s important to know that young Chinese painters may pick their subjects from the background of their culture, but aesthetically they are top-notch Western! They’ve caught on quickly about what the Western canon is. Their contemporary art makes use of Western aesthetics mixed with Asian content. The art world has become totally globalized.

Today we live in a globalized world. What was your childhood like, and what were your artistic influences?

Well, at home there was a father who was a painter.

Rudolph Hausner, a phantastic realist of the Viennese School. What does that do to a child?

Like in every artistic household: art is something normal and certainly nothing solemn or something you get awestruck about. It's something you talk about at the table every day. It's no different in doctors' families. They spend the whole day talking about medicine, and often the children become doctors. Art was something natural, but it also excited us. And sure, it used to get boring at the museum when I was a child, but even though I always made a scene, those things that were commonplace for me were thrilling.

Your father's ideas for pictures were quite unconventional. Was that too a part of daily life?

I've never thought that something could be unconventional. For me it was normal.

I'm just wondering what kind of weird world you grew up in. Literally a phantastic world that had very little to do with the real world. A dream world, you might say – with a portion of gloom. Wouldn't that scare a child?

You have to understand. The images, whatever was being painted in his studio, were normal for me and always there. I never questioned them. I had a little tricycle and rode around in the studio and around my father standing at the easel. There was a lot of green on the canvas, and I'd find that too dull. I wanted it more colorful. I'd ride around him again and say, "Papa, come on, use some red!" It wasn't so important what was on the canvas, maybe some Hieronymus Bosch fairy world. Was it somehow depressing or gloomy? Not to me. It was as it was. We're talking about the late 1950's and into the 60's. Mainly, the late 50's. We had no money, we lived in crowded conditions, and there was no happy ending in sight. And in those days, Vienna had this Eastern European look. But I knew no alternatives. That's the way things were, and we were just a small family unit, father mother child, living together symbiotically. My mother did her part too, working in architectural art, cutting out stones for mosaics. Only later did the success story begin.

And your memories as a teenager?

When I was a teenager, at around 14, all I wanted was to get away. Oppressive is a good word, and it first occurred to me back then. A certain gloom was endemic at home. I always envied other children who had siblings and parents with normal professions, people who'd come home after work and were in a good mood. There was nothing like that in our house – no separation between art and life. Depending on whether things had gone okay or not in the studio, the atmosphere at the dinner table was better or worse. I would imagine that children raised in an artistic household would all have experienced something similar.

Despite that. You decided to go that route yourself. Was there any key experience?

Yes, it's crazy. With eyes wide open I chose this life and wouldn't want any other. There was no decisive moment. It just happened. First, I got involved with stage designing and had no inner urge to paint. It was buried or suppressed or whatever.

Your first stage set – can you remember what it was?

Hmm, whatever it was they let me do. It was nothing I could have chosen myself. I was the best in my class and got a job as an assistant at the Burgtheater. And then I really got into it. I should add that back then there was no such thing as a female set designer. The profession was dominated by men. That used to irritate me a lot.

And the switch from stage designing and painting. What do you think about that today?

Despite their improvised settings, my paintings have nothing in common with the theater – even if some people like to interpret it that way. Painting for me meant absolute freedom – here you have a white canvas. Do something with it. Maybe I got involved in theater because certain connections had always interested me: visual and interpersonal relationships! later I turned it into a strict form. And that is what I paint now – those interpersonal relationships, but I supply my own script – with a setting to boot which I also construct. But all that are just secondary steps. What really counts is the painting itself. Red, blue, green and the kind of energy I invest in a futon or an ear and how they correspond to each other in terms of importance.

Your photos are a part of your work. Would it be possible for your sets –which you use to explore your visual subjects as an environment – to be rendered as installations on their own?

They are functional elements for me on the path to the painting and not meant as installations with their own aesthetic value. For me they are junk that has an intermediate function.

Your goal is reductionism. Why couldn't they be installations like sculptures?

It's all just a momentary declaration within the framework of the art. If someone comes along and says, "For me it's an installation." Well, then that's what it is for that person. I see the matter differently. Contemporary art is primarily a declaration of will. In that respect I am not willing to declare that aspect as art. Someone might think something like that would be a radical statement. My radicalism needs to take place in painting!

(trans. P.J. Blumenthal)