

Female Empowerment: A conversation between Xenia Hausner and Isabelle Graw

Isabelle Graw: I'd like to start with the connection between "Painting and Drama," to reference Ivan Nagel's book of that title.¹ Nagel proposes viewing the painting of the Early Modern era as being dominated not by narration and textual references, but rather by dramatic and theatrical production. He sees theater as key in painting, a concept that applies very well to your work, which seems to be staged and appears to have a set-like construction. There are many details that give your paintings a theatrical look, for example the visual leitmotif of the red-pink-violet "rouge" on your subjects' cheeks. As in Manet's work, paint is being used here as makeup. Certain dramatic tropes like the raised or outstretched arms of the female figures, who seem to be fighting for something, like lamenting Madonnas, are also a part of your repertoire. Many of the pictures contain props such as the disused train carriages in the *Exiles* series (2017), which have a marked stage-like quality. Of course there is a biographical reason for this closeness to the theater: you previously worked as a set-designer, and started to paint comparatively late. Still, I wonder what advantages there are today – in 2022 – to opt for a form of painting as stage performance.

Xenia Hausner: I'm only vaguely acquainted with Nagel's book, and find his distinction between drama and narration a bit nitpicky. My work is a subjective chronicle of current events – whether narrative or representational. What prompted me to work like that? I don't know, it just happened that way: I have to put it as simply as that. There was no other choice. I felt my way there in a semi-conscious process, and I have to leave the process in

¹ Ivan Nagel, *Gemälde und Drama. Giotto, Masaccio, Leonardo* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2009).

that kind of semi-obscurity. I've always been interested in people, and from that point of view it was certainly no coincidence that I ended up in the theater – which is also concerned with human destinies. To that extent I don't think it's all that surprising that my painting also revolves around people. My paintings aren't actually about "staging": they're more like a rehearsal room where you feel your way towards a situation that hasn't yet been clearly decided on. It's the attempt to invent a situation, or rather to find it – a situation that arises between the participants. The paintings don't follow a precise and predefined script.

Graw: So there's also improvisation going on in this rehearsal room, and there's no decision in advance about what the final visual arrangement will look like?

Hausner: I do have a rough idea in the back of my mind, but I also allow myself to be surprised by what happens when the photograph is being taken. And sometimes nothing good happens, or something that isn't usable, and then we regroup and start over again. Or sometimes you have to say goodbye to an idea: not everything that's slumbering away inside you ends up as a picture.

Graw: I'm amazed that you stress the narrative-representational aspect of your pictures – even in relation to the *Exiles* series I mentioned before, in which I'm not quite sure what's actually being narrated. I'm not clear about whether the transportation of the people shown in this train compartment happened voluntarily, or whether their transportation has been forced upon them. The historical context of these intense and vivid-looking scenes remains completely indeterminate. At the same time there are references to the present day, for example in the form of props like the mobile phone, the painted fingernails, the modern

clothes, t-shirts, high heels, etc. And the figures have a sort of bohemian appeal, as in their matted-looking hair – they could have come out of a performance by Anne Imhof, but they also have certain points of intersection with the *Children of Bahnhof Zoo*.²

Hausner: Yes, these are actually fragments, not unambiguously readable stories. This applies both to the *Exiles* paintings and to other situations depicted. Often you can't be sure: do they love each other, do they hate each other, or how are things between them? It's left vague. And I'm also useless in the role of interpreter because the paintings are just as ambiguous and open to different readings for me. That's also how I see the world. It isn't black and white, it's ambiguous. The *Exiles* aren't unambiguously refugee trains. On the contrary: young people from the west are in a panic and don't know where they're headed – there's no future anywhere. It's more about a lack of belonging, about helplessness, about feeling alien. These are themes that don't just apply to refugees in 2015, but to all of us here in Europe. The fact that the idea came to me certainly had something to do with the topicality of the refugee question, but I didn't paint this scene one-to-one as a docudrama, it was more that a new fictional scene developed, even if it was triggered by the current situation.

Graw: It's true that what's shown in the *Exiles* paintings can't be given an unambiguous meaning. The price of this is a certain generality. In this context I'm also thinking of paintings like *Disobedience* (2019) or *Welcome* (2018). In *Disobedience* you see two women, one of them a person of color, and both are armed with tools for self-defense, such as a hammer. So what we see is two female figures who seem to be prepared for resistance and

² A reference to the 1981 film *Christiane F. – Wir Kinder vom Bahnhof Zoo*.

disobedience, except that it's completely unclear what they're actually rising up against. The social structures that are being fought against here are off-stage. Doesn't that run the danger of depoliticizing and individualizing resistance, along the lines of: here we have heroic individual female figures who are resisting whatever? In other words, there's a separation of individuals from the specific sociopolitical conditions that would make their resistance plausible and explain it.

Hausner: I don't know – I don't think I'm interested in painting the whole panorama of the battle that the figures are arming themselves against. I show them armed against dangers to come, whether that might be Harvey Weinstein or an attacker on the train. I think there's a general resistance within me, and that gives rise to these resistant figures.

The two women who get together here are also a "power couple." Women are currently turning the world upside down; they might not be walking about with a hammer, but in fact they're forging alliances and seizing power. And the empowerment of women that's characteristic of our time is what I'm showing in this painting.

Graw: Except that there's nothing essentially emancipatory about female empowerment. Women can also get together as neoliberal entrepreneurs or anti-vaxxers.

Hausner: Well, these two could be anti-vaxxers – but I really don't see them as neoliberal entrepreneurs! Of course not all possibilities of female empowerment are presented in the painting. My couple here come more from *Clockwork Orange*. But the subject is boundless, and I'm interested in the particular case.

Graw: The figure of the combative and sometimes confidently sexualized female figure, as in *Twin Peaks* (2016), runs through your work like a leitmotif.

Hausner: Most of the subjects are less sexualized and more figures of longing: they're isolated and filled with longing, but they're also strong. They aren't victims. And in *Twin Peaks* they're really mocking a male fantasy.

Graw: They're women of action, although the reasons for their actions are not made clear. Their often exaggerated-looking gestures and poses suggest a vehemence, and yet it's unclear where the journey is actually headed.

Hausner: Yes – the journey could be headed anywhere. But the figures have an innate attitude of action.

Graw: I often find – this is very striking in *Exiles II* and *Exiles III* but also in *Blind Date* (2009) – numbers and letters in your paintings. They might be train numbers or inscriptions on a truck. In the painting *St. Francis* (2015) there's a pop-like Coca-Cola logo in the background. Writing and numbers give these paintings the appearance of text-paintings, as if revealing a similarity with conceptual painting. What are you trying to achieve by integrating numbers and text in this way? Is it about underlining the legibility of your paintings? Or do you want to identify painting as a particular kind of language?

Hausner: My answer is going to come as a disappointment: it's just pleasure, pleasure in a number or an inscription, or pleasure in the strangeness that results from the intersection of

two things that actually have nothing to do with each other. The number becomes a sign that introduces a mystery into the picture whose meaning is not revealed. It's something that stands diametrically opposed to the rest of the painting. It's an act of sabotage against myself.

Graw: That's interesting – not least in terms of the history of painting. Whenever text has entered painting, as in Cézanne's brilliant 1866 painting of his father in which his father had a progressive newspaper painted into his hands, or later with the collages of the Cubists, it's been a way of smuggling the real outside world as text into the painting. Is that true of you too?

Hausner: I deliberately include letters and numbers to undermine the emotional life of the players and introduce some reason. At the same time these things give me a formal pleasure. So: two stripes, an eight, a curved C, they're all things that interest me in terms of composition. I'm a composition freak and I'm not indifferent to the relative weight with which things are shaken together in a painting and find their place in it over time. And to that extent, in that play of weights, numbers or letters are interesting from a formal point of view.

Graw: So that means you want to balance the pathos of the agitated figures with the sobriety of the number?

Hausner: More through its strangeness. And perhaps I also want to confront the pathos with the beauty of a number, if I like it straight away. That also applies to other elements in the paintings, the cables and plugs for example.

Graw: Battered-looking cables and plugs are another leitmotif that runs through your work.

Hausner: Yes, I love and collect technical junk. There's a repair station belonging to the Austrian Railway where you can find the weirdest parts. Often I don't know what they were originally intended for: for me they're like sculptures – technically sculptural. And I often bring these objects into my studio, as additional actors, if you like. When two people are sitting there, there might be a danger of pathos – but the object of the coupler, as an additional protagonist, eliminates that danger.

Graw: This electrical junk, the matted painted hair, and the vintage clothes often make the figures in your paintings look as if they were dressed by a costume designer from the 1980s. And at the same time there are the mobile phones I mentioned, or fashionably painted fingernails that establish a connection with the present day.

Hausner: I think the connection with the present comes not through the mobile phone but through the painting. It's contemporary. The clothes mostly belong to the actors, they put on the t-shirt that they'd be wearing anyway, or else they bring a bag with ten t-shirts that all look the same and we take one of those.

Graw: Apart from some famous people from the culture industry – I’m thinking of your portrait of Elfriede Jelinek, *Oh Wildnis (Oh Wilderness, 1998)* – most of the models for your paintings are unknowns, including students from the Academy of Art. I’m thinking for example of the couples you see in the paintings *Rubber Soul (2019)* and *Pure Cool (2016)*....

Hausner: They were drama students in those days. Sometimes there are also more famous actors in the paintings – mostly because we’re friends. But the number of celebs is small: Jelinek, Peyman, Sykora, and a few others.

Graw: Katharina Sykora, the art historian, appears in a green dress in the painting *Puppen Körper Automaten (Puppets Bodies Mere Machines, 2002/2005)*....

Hausner: Yes, I met Katharina Sykora and thought she looked very special. I immediately asked her if she could come to the studio because I’d like to include her in a painting. It was only then that I found my way into her work, it’s crazy.... I’d approached Elfriede Jelinek on the street at the theater festival in Berlin – this is years ago – with the simple words: “You look so interesting, could you come to my studio?” Working relationships with the models have always led to friendships.

Graw: Couldn’t you be accused of *using* the young models as material, particularly since their names aren’t mentioned in the titles of the paintings?

Hausner: My eye uses everything and the whole world is material. But the word “use” in relation to the models is wrong. My models are partners in solidarity on the joint ascent of a

mountain. And if they're students or young people, it's clearly a job for them. The models and I, we love each other, and we retain a connection through the painting.

The idea of "using" somebody comes out of the clichés of studio history with the male cult of genius and female submission. I'm more about solidarity and a sense of mutual uplift. A relationship of trust. Once I've settled on a subject, the drama of my dependence begins. Painter and model in an inverted power arrangement, so to speak. But if it goes well, it's about trust and shared work.

Graw: But given the relationship of solidarity that you're describing here, given the affection and even love between you and your models, I wondered why you don't mention the actors' names in the titles of the painting?

Hausner: That takes me by surprise, I've never been asked that one before. But it's a good idea. I'll have a think about whether the models will be mentioned by name in future – who knows if it's even something they want? In the end the painting has an identity of its own and stops having anything to do with the real figure. The painting has become its own truth, and it really troubles me to see the actual person beside the painted person. My picture titles are mostly verbal creations of my own, so you'd have to list the models specially, like actors in a theater program.

Graw: On the one hand you can't do without these real people, on the other the painting is supposed to abstract from them.... But I'd like to talk to you about color, about the powerful, bright colors you use. They give the scenes in the paintings an artificial, operetta-like aura.

Often you come across shrill color arrangements that have already proved themselves in fashion, like pink and red or pink and orange, as in Yves Saint-Laurent.

Hausner: Yes, Yves Saint-Laurent has great colors. And in fact I love the blue, orange, and pink that he got from the Berbers. There's something so irrational about color, my colors have been powerful from the beginning, and I can't explain them to you – it's basically like Flaubert's "Madame Bovary, c'est moi."

Graw: Maybe we should look at the portrait of Elfriede Jelinek, *Oh Wildnis* (1998), which we mentioned before, to get deeper into the theme of color. Here again I'm struck by the orange: it appears in the figure's hair, in her braids, and was also used for her eyelids and cheeks. It even appears in her hand. Her clothes might be kept a dark blue, but the person seems to be entirely governed by orange.

Hausner: For me her hair is more of an orangey red, and there are also those red patches on her skin. But otherwise the picture tends towards the green and cold, more charcoal and green. She's wearing one of those Japanese nuns' dresses, and she has an instinct for the effect that she creates.

Graw: Yes, that looks like a Japanese designer.

Hausner: Jelinek always dresses brilliantly: she either wears Comme des Garçons or another Japanese designer. And for the painting she's sitting in her Marcel Breuer chair and behind her there were billowing curtains. For a while I was particularly drawn to that billowing,

green curtain landscape. She's sitting there against the light in front of that curtain at her house.

Graw: As so often in your paintings, her features and gestures seem quite roughly drawn. This Jelinek portrait seems to be less a character study than the painting of a woman in the fashion of her time.

Hausner: That's not how I would see it from my point of view. If Jelinek is wearing something Japanese, that flows into it all. But first and foremost I'm concerned with "recognizing" a person, drilling my way into their face until I understand something.

Graw: How long do such sessions generally last?

Hausner: I'd rather not say exactly or nobody would sit for me! I can't tell such off-putting stories [laughs]. But what I can say is that it's always different – not everything works out immediately. Sometimes the process is more resistant and takes longer. But it always takes a few sessions.

Graw: As someone who's based in the Berlin art world, I was particularly interested in your *Paris Bar* painting (2001). It shows a scene that looks very ornamental and hence Matisse-like, with a naked woman's body lying there like Olympia and partly covered with drawings. A male figure lies level with her lap, apparently resting on the female body. And shining in the background is the Paris Bar neon sign. I wondered whether the Paris Bar was being staged here as a place of muses and male fantasies?

Hausner: I'm always grateful for such interpretations because lots of things don't occur to me. It's particularly interesting to have such diverse readings reflected back to me. Each of those readings is actually always true, because everybody associates something different with the painting. I went and got that Paris Bar sign, which had been left in a storeroom. Michel Würthle lent it to me. Then I used it in my studio. It was a physical challenge because the sign's a massive thing. You thought of Matisse and Manet – the painting also reminds me of Rousseau's woman reclining in moonlight (*La Bohémienne endormie*, 1897) – she might have something to do with my painting as well. But none of that was in my head; those tend to be things that occur to us in retrospect. What was in my head was that I wanted to show two backlit reclining figures in a not entirely unambiguous but intimate situation. And again I'm interested in the calligraphic aspect of the Paris Bar inscription. Light is also a dramatic factor that's important to me – I like extreme lighting situations, that Caravaggio thing.

Graw: The self-portraits also seem to be extremely "lit," as with *Kopfschuss (Bullet in the Head)*, 2002–2004), which shows you with the typically patchy pink painted cheeks and slightly unkempt hair.

Hausner: Yes, so when I paint myself, of course I also put on makeup ...

Graw: I'd hope so! Here the pistol acts as a prop that you're holding to your head. There's an oval object in front of you with red and cream-colored stripes – it might be a birthday cake. The background is, as so often in your work, divided up into colored planes. Of course I

immediately thought of Maria Lassnig's *Du oder ich (You or Me, 2005)*, and wondered whether Lassnig is an important influence on you....

Hausner: I like the Lassnig a lot. But my painting was made before hers.

Graw: I know ...

Hausner: ... just in case the world doesn't believe me: Lassnig knew my painting and made something new out of it. Nothing comes out of nowhere: art always lives on something else. It's a constant appropriation of everything: I open my eyes and see the eggs on the breakfast table and maybe they end up in a painting. To put it a different way: the use of inner and outer life is the g-factor of an artistic life.

Graw: Back to the self-portrait of you shooting yourself in the head: I saw it as a kind of ode to aging and finitude, because you're jumping to the end on your birthday with a bullet to the head.

Hausner: Great interpretation! It would never have occurred to me, but it's convincing. In fact I was lovesick and in a bad way. Then I worked through my problem in the painting – I survived through painting. I'm glad I had an outlet valve amidst all that unhappiness.

Graw: Painting in particular does have the potential to suggest the presence of an absent author who has left traces in the work. The self-portrait seems to take this suggestion to an extreme, since it stages the absent creator as present. Your *Vorher (Before, 1994)* and

Nachher (After, 1994) self-portraits show you, once again with rouged cheeks, sitting at your worktable with paints and paint-pots. And they show you “before” in work clothes, and then “after” the completion of the painting, naked with your arms folded. This nakedness seems to tell us that the painter does not only withdraw into the painting but also exposes herself.

Hausner: Yes, she has laid herself bare through her work. Art is always about surrender – for everyone, whether they paint, write, or act. That’s what being naked is about: unprotected surrender.

Graw: The naked body in *After* looks blotchy, not alabaster-like. The process of painting remains visible in it. That blotchiness gives the body an appearance of being threatened by decay.

Hausner: Yes, I have rather a vehement brush, I don’t paint evenly and moderately. Of course, the artist is revealed in the brushstroke. But the hand and the brush are only the end of the artist’s emotional inner life. It’s less about the hand and the brush than it is about the brain and the state of mind behind the brush. Each painting is always also a surrender of the self.

Graw: But can that authentic “surrender” not also be staged with painterly means as an effect?

Hausner: Not for me. I’m only interested in the authentic. In the end there’s only the brushstroke, and either it’s immediate or it’s a mess. If I get it right, it must be authentic.

Graw: Except if I say “I” as a writer, that “I” isn’t completely identical with me. Brushstrokes are conventionalized signs – they belong to a language that might express something about the creator but doesn’t authentically reproduce her.

Hausner: In the end, I’m not me in the painting. The one in the painting is the Other. That’s true. It’s as contradictory as that.

Graw: But were authentic aspects of you mobilized on the way there?

Hausner: Yes, that’s actually the kick to the whole thing: that I drag this thing out of me if it works. Not all your intentions work. But if it works, then something’s been dragged out that you hope’s going to be perceptible or amenable to experience.

Graw: Lastly I wanted to talk to you about the “dynastic principle” in the art world. Your father Rudolf Hausner was a well-known painter, associated with the Vienna School of Fantastic Realism. There are plenty of figures in the art world – from Cecily Brown to Johann König – who come from an artistic family. It gives them a credibility advantage – they’re part of it from the outset. I’m sure it wasn’t easy for you to step into your father’s territory when you declared yourself a painter. They don’t like it in the art world when you leave a place that had been set in stone for you for a long time – and in your family the place of “painter” was occupied by your father.

Hausner: I only encountered prejudices. But I don't want to make myself a victim here. The fact that my father was a painter certainly didn't give me an advantage. I'd have to say that my father belonged to the generation of men who thought women were awful and ridiculed them as an aberration, a biographical mistake. I wanted to be an independent daughter, but not in his field. He didn't live to see the women he thought were so terrible, like Lassnig, becoming international stars and recognized artists. He was born in 1914 – officially a socialist and in favor of emancipation, but not a patron of the arts inside the family. But he was also a charmer and a very warm person. That's what made it so difficult to escape him. Through some kind of playful coincidence I stumbled into painting and it interested me more than I expected. I went on trying it out and suddenly it turned into a life-changing decision. That was unpredictable, and a surprising turn of events for me too.

Graw: Was your father still alive when you made that switch to painting?

Hausner: He did experience that briefly, and he was very troubled by it. He didn't see my first exhibition – he was already dead by then. I wasn't exactly welcomed with open arms at that point, in fact I polarized people from the start.

Graw: So you encountered a lot of skepticism. When and why did the page turn? The reference to your father is there in your surname, which you haven't changed.

Hausner: If I'd changed my name I'd have been embarrassed by myself. I had to put up with that. I encountered some skepticism, but I carried on with what I wanted to do. Painting also meant freedom for me, that was an important aspect. I can't think about that too much – I

have to filter it out, keep myself in a state of naiveté, so to speak. I don't want to know everything – it only weakens you. There are some things that I need to repress. But everything that's repressed in everyday life comes back productively in art. Art is always existential or not at all.