

# Ting Bu Dong

## On the works of Caroline Bachmann and Stefan Banz

By Alan Smithee

### Taylor and Zira

In the motion picture classic *Planet of the Apes* (1968) the astronaut Taylor (Charlton Heston) travels some two thousand years into the future, at approximate light speed and kept in an artificial coma together with his crew. At one point they are forced to make an emergency landing on a “faraway” planet where humans who communicate in grunts steal all of their equipment. Soon after this mishap, they are attacked by a group of highly developed talking gorillas who hunt them down like wild game. Taylor is injured and finds himself caged in the zoo in a city of apes. There he meets the chimpanzee female Zira (Kim Hunter) who likes humans and sets him free. During their escape into the “forbidden zone” they chance upon a cave full of artifacts that indicate an advanced human civilization. Taylor takes leave of Zira, kisses her softly on the mouth and rides away. But only a little later he stands agape, looking at the sunken remains of the Statue of Liberty, and realizes that he is in fact back on Earth, where man-made civilization has been obliterated by nuclear war in the meantime.

The parting kiss of Taylor and Zira is the model image for *Ting Bu Dong*, the hitherto largest-sized painting (390 x 300 cm) by Caroline Bachmann and Stefan Banz. One might call this work, representative of all their jointly created art since 2004, a perfect example of the concept of these two artists. It is a sociopolitical piece that points to a number of different strands of existential meaning with its emblematic subject. The painting in its original form is a staging, an artificial production which here, in its monumental realization and the bewildering contrasts between the characters achieved by the coloring, transforms an essentially harmless gesture of affection into a dramatic and multi-layered presence. The expression of humanity, for instance, is thus both celebrated and reduced to absurdity. The fact that we watch a human kissing an ape (though really just a human in disguise) generates, on the one hand, some-

thing like respect towards the Other, the alien and the animal, but at the same time it feels irritating and repulsive and maybe viewers catch themselves for a moment in their own embarrassment. The paradox of our existence is taken to a significant form of expression here. *Ting bu dong*—often we do not understand a thing in our world even though we pretend to understand everything. We might ask questions such as, Is this kiss a sign of peace, of respect, of love for the most wildly different forms of being—“one world, one dream”—or is it rather an indicator of a deeply decadent society? Does it mean hiding behind a mask or does it make a straightforward statement? But is it not a rather funny, ironic, humorous, and theatrical sight? Can life—and included in it: art, theater, or truth—be taken that seriously at all? The painting is therefore primarily an impulse, a generating force, and leaves us to draw our own conclusions from it.

Caroline Bachmann and Stefan Banz are sensitive observers of the world and also of how we perceive it. They are interested in the social mechanisms in everyday life, in culture and politics, which are communicated by photography, film, the Internet, and magazines. Above all, they explore the lost elements, the falsifying, the misconceiving of material by its transformation into other media and contexts. What can images convey and what happens when familiar subjects and themes reemerge—ever so slightly altered or modified, or associated with extraneous elements, or with certain aspects added or omitted—in the world of painting? In what way does this change the content and what effect does it provoke in us, the beholders? The artists devote particular attention to images or persons who are so well-known that they have in fact long been devoid of any content, representing somehow mere formulas of recognition for concepts such as success, power, beauty, or appearance. This creates explosive paintings which oscillate wildly between the emotions, effectively undermining our very sense of security.

## As I Opened Fire

Although Caroline Bachmann and Stefan Banz decided to work together only in June 2004, their cooperation had in some way already started the year before with a painting titled *My 40th Birthday* that had been made for Banz' exhibition *Un cœur simple* at Museum im Bellpark in Kriens near Lucerne. It showed Mohammed Atta passing through the passport control at Logan Airport on the morning of September 11, 2001, on his way to his dastardly doings. What provoked this work was the fact that September 11 happens to be Stefan Banz's birthday, and that the snapshot for him is something of a key moment for the 9/11 disaster. If Atta and his accomplices hadn't succeeded in getting through this checkpoint, the day might have had a wildly different course and the fate of the world could have taken another direction. This picture, which shows a fatal moment in recent history, is nonetheless in itself entirely harmless. The image would be rather inconspicuous if we didn't know that this is Atta who just went past the last barrier and if we didn't have the date and time stamp of the video footage inserted in the upper left. So this intrinsically innocuous and unspecific scene conceals an unfathomable crime, which is just what the two artists had in mind with their portrayal. For them, a picture never shows merely what it shows but at the same time it always stands for something else, something it hides. And very often you encounter the wolf in sheep's clothing, while aggressive behavior frequently disguises a meek lamb. This obscurity is what interests them, and they challenge us to take a good look at what we see in ever-changing ways and from several different viewpoints.

The first painting that their cooperation actually engendered was *As I Opened Fire*, created in 2004. It shows the principal players of the US administration grown together into a menacing black blotch. On the wall in the background we recognize the unassuming portrait of Anne Frank, the girl killed in a concentration camp during World War II, while the snippet of an air-combat radio message borrowed from a Roy Lichtenstein artwork serves as the painting's caption. These discrete elements, each of which is loaded with connotation, prompt a multi-layered and plurivalent reading. Powerful political leaders, a victim of Nazi persecution and a pop-art hero converge in this work: world history confronting personal narrative, with current events finding an echo in World War II and, by a roundabout route, also in the Vietnam War which had a decisive influence on the 1960s and Lichtenstein's America. These conceptually orient-

ed metaphors bring into connection widely different levels, eras and contexts, while simultaneously drawing, with wit and humor, a sociopolitical picture of our time.

Their cooperation has continued in line with this philosophy, mostly with large-sized paintings. In their next work, *I Shot A Kennedy*, they portray the US trash metal band Slipknot who never goes onstage without masks, putting on a rather histrionic show. At the turn of the millennium, Slipknot was frequently accused by Western media of egging on adolescents to excesses of violence with their "extreme" lyrics and their "decadent" behavior. Several years ago, they were even indirectly given some responsibility for having been the primary cause for numerous runs amok at US and German schools—though whoever has been to a Slipknot concert will have trouble relating to this because their stage performance is so absurd and deliriously over the top that they come across more like an ensemble of comedians than a grave threat to society. As it was created as a sort of counterpart to *As I Opened Fire*, this canvas also uses written statements, taken from a work of the well-known artist Raymond Pettibon and starting with the question "I shot a Kennedy, what did you do?" Again, several levels are suggestively intertwined here, generating strong emotions between shock and humor, hysterics and seriousness, attraction and revulsion and leaving a message that remains ambiguous.

In their subsequent compositions we encounter movie celebrities such as Clint Eastwood, John Ford and Dennis Hopper, historic figures like William Shakespeare, rock stars like Elvis and Kurt Cobain, artists like Pablo Picasso, authors like Thomas Pynchon and music moguls like Rick Rubin, but also political potentates—Fidel Castro, Richard Nixon, Queen Elisabeth II or several military and religious leaders from the Middle East—all of them embedded in new contexts and quite often coupled with reminiscences or references to the current art scene. Apart from that, there are also—with *Ambush* (*The Killers Of Bonnie & Clyde*), *Death Sentence* (*The Charles Manson Girls*) and *Toteninsel*—three works covering the subjects of right and wrong, crime and punishment, truth and deception.

## Toteninsel

While *Ambush* displays the six sheriffs who were photographed and celebrated by the press in 1934 after gunning down Bonnie Parker

and Clyde Barrow with more than 160 machine gun rounds (in the painting they are standing in front of David Lynch's Lost Highway Hotel), in *Death Sentence* we see the young women from the Charles Manson Family right after the judge's decision, laughing their way out of the court room. Both works exemplify the absurdity of violence, once on the side of "justice" and once on that of "crime"—and in the two paintings there is indeed no difference at all. Violence is violence, no matter who commits it. Finally, the little piece *Toteninsel* presents us with a quotation of Arnold Böcklin's famous painting from 1890 bearing the same title. At the same time, it alludes to the appalling catastrophe in the North Italian Vajont valley where in 1963 there was a momentous accident involving the highest arch dam of its time. The tragedy could have been prevented because several people in charge were well aware that as soon as they'd raise the water level behind the dam, an enormous landslide could occur. Even so, they let the water in and two hundred thousand tons of mountain crashed into the reservoir at an incredible speed, causing a flood wave of 280 meters in height to gush over the dam and down into the valley like a tsunami. The disaster took close to 4000 lives. On the painting, we see nothing of all this. It is night, and the moon casts a pale light on the magnificent retaining wall, towering 264 meters over the edge of a lake. A pleasure boat slowly and silently approaches the looming monster, bestowing a seductive beauty to the heroic landmark.

## Narcissus and Echo

The two installations *Narziss* and *Echo* that Caroline Bachmann and Stefan Banz created especially for the spacious rooms of Galerie Urs Meile in Beijing concern themselves with the subject of self-absorption and reflection. In Greek mythology, Narcissus was the beautiful son of the river god Kephisos and Leiriopé. Legend has it that the much-wooed lad scorned the love of nymph Echo, in punishment whereof the avenging deity Nemesis (according to some other sources, Aphrodite) made him fall hopelessly in love with his own image reflected in the water. In this way, the prophecy of the blind seer Teiresias was fulfilled, according to which Narcissus would only have a long life if he never knew himself. One day, he sat by the lake to delight in his mirror image when, by divine intervention, a leaf fell into the water, creating waves that disturbed the reflection. Whereupon he died from shock at the intuition that

he was ugly (because the waves distorted his portrait). After his death he was transformed into a daffodil (*Narcissus* is the botanic genus of that flower).

The installation *Narziss* consists of a square black floor space—a shallow basin filled with some 5 cm of water. In the center of this liquid quadrangle there is a wooden construction of about 200 cm in height on which a 35 mm movie camera is mounted that is trained on the water and films its own reflection. Image and reflection, original and imitation, being in love with gazing at one's own accomplishments, turning away from the outside world, communicating only within one's peer group: all this might as well be a perfect characterization of great Hollywood cinema. But does the camera really film itself? Is it working or nothing but a dummy? Traditionally, the sculpture in art history has always been a replica, a reproduction, a symbol of something that exists in reality: Jesus on the Cross, Mary holding the Christ child, St. Sebastian full of arrows. There is this unforgettable motion picture by Dennis Hopper, *The Last Movie*, produced by Hollywood in 1971 but never distributed after the first previews. In it, the inhabitants of a little village in Peru put together a dummy wooden camera to make their own Western movie in which they shoot each other with live ammunition and get into bloody fistfights. What we see is never only what we see. Or: what really happens may not be visible to us.

From that point of view, the second installation, *Echo*, is also about the experience of seeing and about the reflection of perceiving what is not perceptible at first. As long as we haven't climbed the steps of the 250 cm high cube, we just see a rectangular black shape, and when we bring ourselves to go up and peer into the cube's inside, we look onto a water surface returning our own reflection. That is the ultimate ground of our being—courage, conquering one's fears, curiosity, and self-reflection in order to survive.

### Alan Smithee

Born in Hollywood in 1967, the same year he directed his first motion picture, *Death of a Gunfighter* (released in 1969). This debut feature film received high critical praise from the press. Thus the *New York Times* called it "... sharply directed by Alan Smithee who has an adroit facility for scanning faces and extracting sharp background detail." And *Variety* wrote that "Smithee's direction keeps the action taut and he draws convincing portrayals from the supporting cast." His oeuvre is exceptionally widespread and multifarious. Over the years, he has been working in the most diverse genres and styles, producing more than seventy pictures and screenplays. Today he is one of the most well known personalities in the US movie business.