

9 December 2006 – 27 January 2007

Bachmann/Banz “Ting Bu Dong “ – Paintings and Installations

With his characteristic mischievous grin on his face, Pablo Picasso is wielding a handgun. On the large-sized painting "L'homme qui tire plus vite que son ombre (Pablo Picasso)" (2006), the father figure of 20th century art stands out from the dark background only by the white stripes of his T-shirt and the big white hat. In the middle of his chest, we notice a circular spot—a rose-colored circlet with a violet center. What is the master of modernity doing there, why does the sight of a gun amuse him like that? Is the colored spot on the artist's breast a target?

Caroline Bachmann (*1963) and Stefan Banz (*1961) make use of the enormous archive of images and fragments of images stored in the mind of any contemporary person with an average interest in what happens in the world.

Everybody knows the laughing Pablo Picasso, and on other paintings by Bachmann/Banz we recognize just as immediately the portrait of US President George W. Bush, the face of Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, the likeness of actor Dennis Hopper or the profile of the aging Cuban dictator Fidel Castro. The complexity of Bachmann/Banz's work results from the superimposition of several different layers of meaning. By making their paintings the dramatic focal point of quotations from all kinds of cultural, social, political, and historical connotations, Bachmann/Banz deliberately link up the most wildly different contexts. The density of relationships thus created is irritating to the viewer because the individual elements make their statements in opposing directions. The political, and often critical, undertone in the work of Caroline Bachmann and Stefan Banz stems from this brokenness, this oscillation between wildly different perspectives. "Ting Bu Dong" (in free translation „I did not understand“) is the title of the one principal work in the exhibition from which the first solo show of Bachmann/Banz in China takes its name: the inability to understand, to find your way in the maze of possibilities, to make up your mind in the jungle of potential truths—all this forms part of the modern existential predicament in our increasingly fragmented world. Assessing things with regard to their truthfulness and reliability depends largely on one's own point of view today, which is of course quite individually defined. This feeling of brokenness and ambivalence is fundamental to the work of Bachmann/Banz. The large-sized painting "Ting Bu Dong" shows Taylor and Zira in the motion picture classic "Planet of the Apes". Taylor—Charlton Heston—kisses Zira—Kim Hunter disguised as female ape scientist—in gratitude for having freed him from captivity in the city of apes. Apart from the action sequences the film also makes a statement of social criticism: for one, it broaches the issue of our destruction of planet Earth by nuclear war; on the other hand, it moots the question of repressive treatment of animals by man. In their interpretation, Bachmann/Banz disengage the two characters from their movie context—all details that might allow to localize the scene have been removed—while the size and coloring of the painting bestow a both dramatic and ambiguous presence upon the scene. It is no accident that the visual quotation of the painting "Ting Bu Dong" is from a motion picture, one of the popular media with the widest spread. By their way of handling the material, however, the artists prevent the viewer from making quick associations with any well-defined context and together with this irritation, they encourage a deeper reflection that goes beyond the mere motif of the picture.

Caroline Bachmann and Stefan Banz always develop and realize their creative projects together. Taking newspaper shots, private photos as well as visual icons from contemporary history as their models, they first computer-edit them and then assemble the elements to form the composition of their paintings.

For the exhibition in Galerie Urs Meile in Beijing they also created, apart from numerous canvasses, the two installations "Narziss" and "Echo". "Narziss" consists of a rectangular shallow basin filled with water at the center of which a dummy 35 mm movie camera is mounted on a wooden construction. The lens of the camera is trained on the water in the black basin, as if searching for its own mirror image on the dense surface which is unmoving but not lifeless. Just like the eponymous vain lad from Greek mythology who had fallen in love with his handsome reflection and could not take his eyes off it until his very death, this installation by Bachmann/Banz refers to the almost unbridgeable gap between perception and reality, image and reflection. And when visitors at some point climb the steps of the other installation, "Echo", to examine the inside of the black cube, they are again peering onto a water surface where they see the reflection of their own faces. In the Greek legend, Echo was a nymph whose love Narcissus had spurned, upon which she retreated to a cave in grief and despair and gradually lost all her substance until she faded away to nothing but a faint whisper, the echo.

Here as well, Bachmann/Banz set off associations in our minds with their art, raising questions. What do we see, what is our perception? And what conditions our seeing—and our perception? Finally, what is the shape of the echo left in our heads by the vast number of media images?

Bachmann/Banz are on a quest for the realities behind the pictures, but in this quest they are making use of these very pictures, not least to make viewers understand their own perception of reality.

Karin Seiz, Lucerne, 12.11.2006