

Pastiche Revisited

Melli Ink's reanimation of mythological imagery from art history

Art is subject to all manner of interpretations, but what it compels us to do above all is to look closely, to examine something a second or third time—thus spurring us to search for the right perspective. Since differentiating between originals and imitations has become obsolete, it is precisely these linguistic shifts in perspective that are becoming increasingly relevant, both for the producers and for the recipients of artworks. It is also this fundamental question of finding a point of view that arises upon confronting and examining the multifaceted work of Melli Ink.

Ruin of Solitude was conceived by the artist for the public art project *Gasträume*, which took place over the summer of 2013 in Zurich. The installation consists of two parts: a bench and a large tiled mural located on the Basteiplatz in the city center. The mural consists of three hundred hand-painted ceramic tiles that the artist decorated with symbolic designs using iconography from the Catalan artist Joan Miró. The specially designed bench positioned in front of this colorful wall invites viewers on the Basteiplatz to spend time contemplating the work.

This generous installation marks the continuation of a group of works that Melli Ink has been developing since 2010: painted ceramics. In the beginning she used this technique in a very ordinary form by producing small sculptures, vases, and large plates, which she decorated with abstract motifs. The *Constellation Series* is a group of experimental small-format works that served to systematically and carefully investigate this subject. A similar approach is also apparent in earlier series¹, where drawing is used as a preliminary stage for works executed in three dimensions. However, while the small-scale objects only flirt with the quotidian nature of their possible use², *Ruin of Solitude* expressly demands that observers interact with it. The installation, which includes a large bench, aims to entice people to sit, to direct the view of the attracted passersby to the tiled mural—from one particular perspective, which the artist defined through the arrangement of the bench and the mural. This device is reminiscent of the museum context; however, in public space, where completely different codes apply, it represents a provocation.

The motifs that Melli Ink painted on the tiled mural are equally ambiguous. At first glance, the iconography is evocative of the great decorative artist Joan Miró; upon closer examination, it becomes clear that a plethora of codes and emblems are concealed under the easily deciphered decorations, which makes it impossible to clearly categorize the designs. These ruins of solitude only pretend to help the viewer decipher them. On the pictorial surface, themes from pop culture (the title alludes to Superman's crystal "Fortress of Solitude") are combined with subjects from high culture (Miró, Calder, Taauber-Arp, Lissitzky, etc.), as well as musical and biographical associations (Bob Marley's "Coconut Airway," the "little ghost" from the children's author Otfried Preussler) to form a varied pictorial universe that can be read from a wide range of perspectives. It illustrates the viewers' paradox, which is also the artist's paradox: "The *Ruin of Solitude*," Melli Ink wrote in an e-mail to the au-

¹ For instance, cf. the Apocalyptic Riders (2007) or the Medusa motifs (2006)

² The artist also used prefabricated, unpainted porcelain plates and bowls from pottery supply shops.

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E-mail from May 29, 2013

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The 2003 performance *Plates* is an early example of the artist's use of porcelain: in a neutral space, there was a table with several hundred plates, which she threw on the ground one by one with outstretched arms, where they broke into pieces.

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Cf. Zygmunt Baumann, *Intimations of Postmodernity*, London 1992.

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In the 7th century the first horseman, who rode on a white horse, was viewed as a representation of Christ, the savior. However, Martin Luther was the first to interpret this horseman in a negative light. Under the influence of Dürer's terrifying vision and against the background of the siege of Vienna by the Turks in 1529, he viewed the first horseman as a tyrannical plague. This reading continued to hold until early 20th century.

thor, “seemed like a fitting title, also as a reference to the solitude of the artist, who toils away alone in his studio, and at the same time the destruction of solitude (ruin of solitude)—that is, the overcoming of solitude through art (making).”³

These multiple cultural codes are one of the central themes of Melli Ink's work, which consistently expresses itself on the basis of this conceptual content in various media and techniques and exhibits a high degree of referentiality—within her own work⁴ and in regard to the pastiche-like montage of art-historical set pieces. As Zygmunt Bauman noted in his epochal and fundamental treatise on postmodernism, this is no longer about the question of evaluating whether something is an original or a copy: “Contemporary art has transformed the history and ethnography of art into a pool of extemporal and exterritorial, permanently usable resources, which can be picked at will and at random.”⁵

The cultural-historical reservoir that Melli Ink draws from extends far back in time, in some cases to the late Middle Ages. The vanitas representations in particular are at the core of a multi-part group of works that Melli Ink developed between 2007 and 2009: *Apocalyptic Riders*, *Cold Blood*, and, in a larger context, the sewn cloth objects entitled *She has a quilted brain*. The point of departure for these works is the famous woodcut by Albrecht Dürer from 1497/98, *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse*, a motif that already had a long tradition and a varied history of interpretation⁶ in Dürer's time.

Melli Ink's work adds a new chapter to this history: she transforms the flat representation into a three-dimensional installation ensemble made of glass which takes on life-size proportions. At the same time, the horsemen, who appear in Dürer's work as part of a group, are shown individually in glass boxes, separated from their representative horses. Death, war, hunger, and sickness are thus enlarged to human scale and, also due to the absence of weapons of war, gain an almost human presence—as fleeting as all earthly existence. The fact that Melli Ink, as in previous works, continues her work with glass reinforces the codification of fragility. Against the background of the timeless explosiveness of the subject, the installation generates a solemn effect that captivates viewers while transcending the boundaries of periods, styles, and cultures.

Glass as a material possesses a strange quality, particularly in regard to art. Hard and stable, and yet fragile, breakable, and difficult to tame: the artist's motivation to repeatedly utilize glass stems from these contrasting characteristics, as well as her biographical roots. In *Faulty Towers*, Melli Ink realized an impressive installation constructed of glass, rose quartz, and crystal. Inspired by Hieronymus Bosch's *Garden of Earthly Delights*, she created an entire series of fragile Babylonian structures, whose glittering surface embodies the bling glamor of today. Clearly, however, this is an easily breakable kind of beauty, a temporary glass architecture show that threatens to collapse at any moment.

7 The American artist Christopher Williams conceived a photographic installation that deals with questions regarding formal colonial strategies of appropriation, based on historical glass models of exotic plants which he researched in museums of natural history: *From Angola to Vietnam*, twenty-seven black-and-white photos, 1985

Finally, Melli Ink continues in the tradition of the biological display cases of the 18th and 19th centuries with the two series *Savage Garden* (2007) and *Cubomedusa* (2006). In order to catalogue and study the world in times before the invention of visual recording devices, a special representational technique was developed that can still be found in the collections of museums of natural history: the glass model.⁷ Melli Ink revisited this traditional technique and, with the help of specialized glassblowers, she presented these flesh-eating creatures as realistic animations in glass boxes so that even the most media-saturated viewer can no longer discern to what extent these representations are real.

The in-between, the space created by this ambiguity of the creature and the creator, is the zone of the pastiche, where viewers find their own perspectives and references—the fascinating room for interpretation that Melli Ink gives us in her multifaceted work.

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