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Ellen Gronemeyer *Affentheater*

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by Charles Schultz

What is to be done when one generation's entertainment becomes the next generation's disparagement? Does one laugh, cringe, or contemplate? If we can draw any conclusions from the paintings of Ellen Gronemeyer, whose work engages this very question, then it would seem all three reactions are equally valid. Her current exhibition, *Affentheater*, which translates as "Ape Theater," refers to the cadres of chimps that would impersonate humans in various comedic sketches on stage. Apparently quite popular during its heyday, the pastime evolved into an idiomatic expression in the German language for situations that are generally noisy and chaotic, as well as any behavior that appears exaggerated and ridiculous.

Gronemeyer's paintings convey the psychology of the phrase exquisitely. They are not pretty, but attractive in the manner of things that have fully embraced and embodied their monstrousness. They seem honest and unrestrained, like a bunch of drunks telling you what they really think. Except there is far more nuance in what these paintings have to impart than in any drunken rant I've heard.

The subject matter of Gronemeyer's paintings is consistently grotesque. Cartoonish figures with generic facial features are portrayed in states of bliss so ecstatic their eyes bulge and their toothy grins look stretched to the point of snapping off their heads. "Funkuchen" (2012) exemplifies the deranged horror of such happiness; it looks the way amphetamines feel when one doubles up on the recommended dosage. "Funkuchen" is organized around a central sun-like head, complete with radial flare and a madman's smile. The sun's popping eyes are themselves turned into heads whose own eyes are popping. And above the left eye, in the forehead space, there appears to be a skydiver plummeting headfirst. The diver's eyes, somewhat predictably, are so large they look swollen. In Gronemeyer's world, terror and rapture are nearly indistinguishable.

There is no pictorial depth in Gronemeyer's scenes; everything presses together on the surface of the canvas amassing into an incredible visual density. Bodies come apart in the scrum; heads float amidst heads; arms and legs don't necessarily attach to torsos. In paintings such as "Find ich spitze" (2012), the whole scene softens into a kind of soupy obscurity of energetic brushwork that only occasionally resolves into identifiable figures. Paintings such as this one drive home the bifurcating principle in Gronemeyer's technique: The figurative component disintegrates into line and form, approaching the non-space of total abstraction, though not fully arriving there. Physically, Gronemeyer's canvases tend to sag a bit under the weight of her paint. Like Lucian Freud, she builds her surface up with so many layers of oil that the pictures get all knobby. Unlike the late Englishman, Gronemeyer's strength is not in her sense of color, but in the gestural heft of her paint handling. Every work has its own topography, complete with countless ridges and ravines, some deep enough to cast their own shadows. Whatever flippant ridiculousness her pictures may convey pictorially is held in check by the sense of persistence and patience evident in the slow accumulation of pigment on the picture plane.

Of 19 works on view, "Gambling Caviar" (2012) stands out as a particularly fine composition. Here the color is keyed down low and the scene is stuffed with heads and eyes, as if the viewer were looking out at a tightly packed crowd in some smoky dance hall. "Gambling Caviar" has a clear precedent in the pictures of James Ensor, perhaps most specifically his "Self-Portrait with Masks" (1899) in which faces are similarly detached from bodies, given garish expression, and presented on a flat vertical plane. Of course, Ensor was painting masks, but cartoons aren't so different: both maintain just enough realism to make their farcical nature enjoyably absurd. For Gronemeyer's paintings this turns out to be a quintessential distinction. Without that element of recognition her paintings would pass completely into the realm of abstraction. That may happen in the future, but for now they are doing well pivoting on the threshold.

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