

The Image of Man in Painting and Sculpture

Harald Kohlmetz and Gil Shachar

The realization of the two solo-exhibitions by Harald Kohlmetz and Gil Shachar at Semjon Contemporary will fulfill a long-held wish of mine.

Harald Kohlmetz, a former fellow student at the Hochschule der Künste/Berlin School of Fine Arts from 1987 to 1994, has never stopped painting, despite his teaching career, most recently in Koblenz. Having returned to his birthplace, he is now welcomed with a solo-exhibition of his latest works.

Since our joint exhibition *Zündstoff Wachs* in the Museum Villa Rot near Ulm in 2012/13, I keep best memory of Gil Shachar – as a person and of his work. Already our first encounter there inspired me to think of presenting the works of these two artists in comparative dialogue.

Harald Kohlmetz and Gil Shachar work with representations of the human figure, one of them painting from imagination (Harald Kohlmetz) and the other one making casts of real persons, showing incredible skills when painting them breathing life in his creations. One confidently confronts the observer with the persons portrayed and their penetrating gaze, while the other presents his creations with their eyes shut, thus directing their/our gaze inwards.

Both artistic constructions have a powerful spatial presence. The observer is forced to interact with them and cannot simply pass or ignore them. Certainly both artists, and this is what they have in common, refer to the human being in general, holding up a mirror to mankind or the viewer, thus triggering the particular and generating specific reactions between the observer and their work.

The reactions are manifold. Not everybody, however, is capable of rising to that challenge, as the works of both artists are not truly easy to digest, not simply beautiful art. The viewer is thrown back upon himself/herself, and this is also the key to the understanding, acceptance of and awakened love to the created: the work of art is a worthy counterpart, be it painting or sculpture. The viewer must relate to it, withstand the gaze, let it pass right through himself/herself and return it or, as in Shachar's works, overcome the initial shyness of a voyeuristic gaze, i.e. to study the details in the head-and-shoulders portrait of *Jan*. It breathes with life, as if ready to open its eyes in an instant.

The exhibits of both artists have such a presence, because we feel naturally drawn to them. The experienced counterpart makes it powerful. And not without reason: The privilege of developing a unique and convincing visual imagery is still reserved to just a few contemporary artists dealing with the human figure, as the exuberant (art)

history has certainly “raised the bar” for the human figure. Both artists, however, stand up to that challenge.

My key experience with the works of both artists – with 20 years’ time having passed between the encounters – can be described as follows and has become my indicator in the aesthetic valuation of art: art must excite, it must rouse people, proverbially take one’s breath and, at the same time, move and touch, almost tenderly. Leave the observer gazing stupefied, reconceiving creation(s) as a miracle.

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