

East of Eden – or the Concept of the So-Called Genuine Feminine and its Deconstruction

Thoughts on the Works of Ute Essig

In her forth solo-exhibition at Semjon Contemporary the artist Ute Essig presents recent works from diverse work groups.

Her ceramic works and creative techniques like the art of knitting and embroidery are well suited to anchor her name in art history that has lately developed its own dynamics. Her works possess their own artistic language and a high recognition value, and therewith best prerequisites for canonization.

Original to them is that their materials and techniques have a female connotation, or in other words: common to all her groups of works is that the applied materials and techniques are genuinely (male-?) defined as feminine.

And this leads us directly to the artist's concern to question or at least holds up a mirror to social gender constructs and their cultural and socio-political embodiments: the supposedly feminine manufacturing techniques like knitting and embroidery are consciously adapted as artistic techniques and refined, with a wilful and surprisingly 'fresh' impact on the artist's figurative language and style. Also material groups like porcelain and pottery, traditionally associated with the sphere of home and household, are subject to distinct gender-specific ascriptions in our West European culture, with the woman as carer and manager of this 'domain'.

When regarding dissimilar conditions of participation in economic, political and cultural life (here especially the art market) from a gender perspective, it becomes obvious to what extent the role of women is still defined by society: woman as mother (taking care of children and her husband), as homemaker, as playmate. Not without reason Eve, ancestress of the female sex, is described as seductress of Adam who is to blame for having been expelled from Paradise for biting into an apple from the Tree of (not only erotic!) Knowledge. This primeval sin and this alleged culpability, as we are led to believe, have already very early defined the female sex as inferior to men. The role of woman as an autonomous, freethinking

and -acting individual representing half of mankind does not exist. The consequences are still present in our (mostly unconscious) lives.

One surprising aspect in the work of Ute Essig is the amount of liberty she takes to shape these cultural techniques and materials with their connotations, fashion new and unique creations and relieve them of their connotated meaning. Her vases become political statements with graphic elements and are, at the same time, sculptures due to their shapes. Two displayed groups of buckets made of black or white unglazed porcelain and arranged in descending alignment become a fragile installation that is, however, placed confidently in the gallery (*until there is nothing left...*). The embroidered, neon-yellow hanging sculptures from Monofil (fishing line) create a cloudscape that keeps expanding irregularly into space, making a mockery of the perfectly waning and waxing meshes (or taking it to an extreme). However, at the same time, an exciting abstract form is created, very much in the interest of Ute Essig, that may, through its translucent texture and dependent on the hanging site, create a varied interplay of light and shadow. Ironically, the fishing line is reminiscent of male-bonding associations: only over the last few years the other sex has caught up, as the number of fisherwomen is constantly increasing.

Moreover, the artist's well-known embroideries create an interesting contrast with bourgeois, Biedermeier artefacts like nicely arranged embroidered tea towels and handkerchiefs. Elements that are usually artfully hidden (or more precisely sewn), namely the beginnings and ends of every thread, become design elements, through their expansion into space animating the thus created picture and even transforming the embroidery into an illusion of a three-dimensional, vibrant drawing.

Viewed unconventionally, the Apple of Knowledge may also be seen as a symbol of woman's liberation from her role as man's helpmate formed from Adam's rib when he was longing for a mirror to recognize himself.

Fortunately, however, this mirror also has its own will!

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Please see also other texts on the work of Ute Essig published over the course of our cooperation.