

Gil Shachar – *Lunapark Transylvania*

The title already suggests a possible line of associative thought, and one that is not unintended here. The term 'Lunapark' will probably be universally interpreted as an amusement and theme park, a fine contemporary example being Disneyland. Supplemented with 'Transylvania', we are immediately reminded of Count Dracula from Transylvania, formerly Siebenbürgen, in present-day Romania. In 1897, the Irish author Bram Stoker created a fantastical monument to the 15th century historical figure Count Dracula ('dracul' is Romanian for 'devil') as a vampire, making him the most celebrated dweller of that very region, also known as Wallachia. It is interesting to note that the Lunapark – the artist was so far unaware of this – had its origin in Berlin of all places.

Back to the roots!

From 1904 to 1919 the Lunapark was a popular amusement destination for Berlin's population and visitors to the city with up to 16,000 restaurant seats, with the number of visitors already reaching the million mark by 1910. In 1934 the Lunapark was closed by order of the new regime and a year later the whole complex at the Halensee was pulled down to make room for the large wide roads leading, among other things, to the Olympic Stadium.

A gigantic water slide was also erected for the public's delectation in the Lunapark's heyday. The world's first escalator is said to have been installed there. Also present were the ethnological expositions familiar from fairgrounds and zoological gardens at that time, with people of other nations whom Central Europeans found somewhat foreign and exotic. Typical of the day was still the undignified and discriminatory exhibition of people who diverged from the usual norm due to their unusually small or large stature, hirsutism or status as Siamese twins.

If you already know Gil Shachar's work, it comes as no surprise that he likes his true-to-life bust sculptures to be inspired by this very special world. The artist as a researcher and interpreter, the artist – necessarily inquisitive – who comprehends and interprets the world for himself and ultimately on our behalf.

Nor is it surprising that someone who breathes new life, a new soul into his realistic bust portrait, into the emerging fictional figure, should be fascinated by the anomaly of hirsutism of the body and face: Gil is a master of the hair of the head.

The hairs of the eyebrows and scalp are painstakingly 'painted on', and the paint material also allows the depiction of the individual hair to stand out slightly since it lies on the skin. The central – so far untitled – main character of Lunapark Transylvania is remarkable for his complete facial hirsutism. We are reminded of a human being transmuted into an animal (a werewolf?), even if we share our own familiar facial features with him. The painting of the facial hair must have been a real treat for Gil, because I know from conversations with him that painting the hair is a meditative act for him. He spends innumerable hours allowing the always extremely short hair to grow before his eyes. The uniformity of synchronous hair growth, the flowing around and hugging of the skull with its subtle changes of direction due to the natural-looking hair whorls, the zero point at the fontanel from where the hair's direction of growth radiates out in all directions – this must be like a musical composition for the artist where everything comes together when the final hair is painted on. A hairless wart on one side of the head of his recently created bust sculpture injects added tension.

But how challenging it must be when he – so far untypically – applies hair to the face. The smooth, hairless skin is reduced to the transitional area around the closed eyes – or rather, the eyelids, mouth and ears. How does the artist decide where exactly the hair should stop? For a couple of hairs too many, in the wrong place, could have a huge impact the depicted person's emotional expression.

As with all previous heads and bust portraits, the eyes of the protagonists are closed. This is because it is not possible to take a cast from of a living person with his or her eyes open. But this necessity has become a virtue, because the sculptures gain a very special Gil Shachar aura, namely that of the inward gaze into the outside world. This circumstance makes the new figure with facial hair human, allows us to connect and sympathise with him and makes him vulnerable. The physiognomy alternates between a slight sadness, self-absorption and great sensitivity as well as inner attentiveness. The softness of its expression is defined, among other things, by precisely that hairless corridor of the face that makes the mouth plastically soft and

sensual. And by the bare ears. The temptation and moral torment of voyeurism, which we all share, is dampened by the figure's closed eyes. We are truly invited to approach the object of our curiosity unseen. We shudder silently and discreetly. In the Lunapark or on the historical fairgrounds (of the human 'exhibit'), the exposition of 'living attractions' is an incomparably brutal one. Only the anonymous mass of gapers forms a protective space and allows these boundaries of decency and our innate 'common sense', a natural distance, to fall.

In combination with the relief-like, brightly coloured, large circular wall sculptures – casts of crumpled paper – the Lunapark theme becomes clear once again. The powerful messaging of the billboards, the shrill colours of the showman's machinery such as carousels and slides etc. find an abstract echo in the wall sculptures. Some of them might even remind us of an emoji or a symbol for Mickey Mouse.

The sculptural essence of the wall work only becomes apparent from close up. In those areas especially, smaller circles are cut out of the large (moon) discs and expose the exhibition wall to the gaze and allow the crumpled elevations to become particularly visible, revealing a strength of material beyond that of paper. The surface of myriad creases also creates a sculptural surface, which at the same time enlivens the simple basic shape with its multitude of minimal cast shadows.

Gil's works are all self-representing solitary sculptures, but their relative arrangement calls forth stories that we calibrate against our own experience. In Dead Flat, his last solo exhibition, for example, one could read in Eli, the bust sculpture of an eight- to eleven-year-old boy, the figure of the Little Prince from Staint Exupéry's tale in the context of the large wall work of a crescent moon.

The same applies here. The figure of a totally hirsute male bust in the context of the large, mostly brightly coloured wall discs (mono- or polychrome) with circular cut-outs visually underscores the exhibition title, which may already suggest a line of interpretation.

Gil is able to captivate us with his works, be they his bust sculptures or the non-figurative, more abstract wall sculptures. We respond to both groups of works with incredulity. In the case of the bust sculptures we overcome our shame and are fascinated by the supposedly naturalistic reproduction of the human countenance. The very way in which the artist creates the hair on the head can enable us to grasp

the fact that his special painting technique (with wax and pigment) of each painted-on hair actually creates the sign of a hair. The corpus becomes the canvas.

It is the puzzling oscillation between reality and illusion that interests the artist and that he executes magnificently. The fascination in the fact that Gil is able to cast a sculpture from a sheet of crumpled paper smoothed flat also amazes us, since paper is connoted with absolute fragility, and crumpled paper all the more so. Instead of bronze, the artist uses epoxy resin. This makes things easier and in the production process he is not dependent on a foundry and can produce his casts independently at any time in his studio.

Gil's work suits our times perfectly, because it operates with the epiphany of the human figure or of the thing. For the quick look, possibly simplified by Instagram and Facebook, the work is to be grasped (not necessarily incorrectly) in its essence. But anyone who takes the time to study the work at first hand can grasp the dimension behind it: it represents the human being and the thing, and yet it has been given its own soul.

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