

Betwixt and between dream and day

Rochus Lussi's morning drawings

Dr. Heinz Stahlhut

Since his stay in New York in 2016, the sculptor Rochus Lussi has made it a habit to create three drawings before beginning to work in his studio. He uses neither a pencil nor a crayon, but a brush. Strictly speaking, therefore, one can hardly speak of drawings, since the line only plays a marginal role in these works. They are, in fact, spontaneous paintings rendered with a distinctly fluid substance, which is clearly evident in the dried, condensed pools of erstwhile liquid paint on various sheets. Since 2016, the artist has imbued the fluid substance, a concentrated wood stain, with paint in shades of brown, black, red and other tints, and diluted it with a dash of water to vary the intensity of the colour for this long-term project. Due to the continual addition of paint, there is still a trace of the original colour in the glass jar that imparts a palimpsest-like effect on the drawings. As a result, there is a continuity of colour among the drawings, and collectively, they tell his stories.

It comes as no surprise that the works resemble East Asian calligraphies which, after a long pause, are spontaneously rendered on paper in one movement by the masters of this technique.

Attuning

The similarity to calligraphy also alludes to the function of these sheets. In line with meditation exercises, their presumable purpose is to lead one from the inertia of sleep and night to wakefulness and activity. By concentrating on three works, each executed in one movement, the artist is attuning himself to his conceptual work. This consists of, as is well known, conceiving and subsequently creating naturalistic reproductions of rather quotidian objects such as bread, animal skins or rubbish bags which, in their multitude or in combination, give rise to a bewildering effect. Therefore, the artist would probably not mind if impressions from the fantastical world of dream flow into his morning drawings and thus enrich his three-dimensional works.

After having laid out three A3 sheets of paper, the artist dips a large, round brush into the glass jar containing the wood stain, waits until the brush is saturated and then glides it across the sheet with as little thought as possible. The idea here is that the brush guides Lussi's hand. This enables free, spontaneous creations, sometimes completely abstract, sometimes quite interpretable in figurative terms. Then, however, the artist may guide the brush to alter the resulting form, only to relinquish it once again and allow himself to be surprised once more.

Finding form

The figures that Lussi captures on paper every morning are as astonishing and fanciful as they are genuine. This is where, as mentioned earlier, relicts of the subconscious, at work in dreams and half-sleep, may gain contour. Natural ferocity and sexuality seem to burst forth in the form of dancing fauns and multiple penises. Blood and excretion are not shamefully concealed as would be in everyday life but become the actual subject of the picture – and because it is fluid, it is a world without boundaries that Lussi presents to us here. The technique of brush drawing is also primarily responsible for this. The depiction, executed with a wet brush, takes on a life of its own: pools form, the liquid makes its own way or at times even splashes beyond the painted contour. The painting has its own untamed logic, which may sometimes surprise the artist himself and perhaps serve as an inspiration again and again for a new, three-dimensional work.

Interpreting

The role of chance is not insignificant in these drawings and, for that matter, nor is the monochrome. As a consequence, Lussi's morning drawings are reminiscent of Rorschach tests, even though these are notoriously unartistic pictures, merely a series of inkblots. These are used in psychological diagnostics in which test persons interpret images into essentially non-representational pictures, which in turn is intended to allow conclusions to be drawn about their psychological state.

Lussi's aim is not to provide therapeutic treatment for his audience, but rather to present them with images that, in the tradition of surrealism, trigger different associations due to their open-endedness and ambivalence. Moreover, when viewing a series of Lussi's sheets, what has just been seen will inevitably influence the interpretation of subsequent sheets, just as it had the artist when drawing the sheets. Interpreting these works remains just as fluid as the paint was when the drawings were created. The ongoing series of morning drawings as such becomes a metaphor for our consciousness, which is entirely open to the influences of bodily sensations, to the subconscious and to reason.

Heinz Stahlhut, born in 1963, studied Art History, History and Archaeology in Berlin and Basel; worked initially as a research assistant at Fondation Beyeler, thereafter curator at the Museum Tinguely Basel. 2008 Completion of his doctoral thesis on watercolours by the Italian-American artist Francesco Clemente, born in 1952, published by Verlag für Moderne Kunst Nürnberg. 2008 – 2013 Head of the collection at the Berlinische Galerie, Berlin, and from 2013 to 2018 in the same function at the Museum of Art Lucerne; since 2019 director of the Hans Erni Museum in Lucerne.

Publications on post-war and contemporary art, including Serge Brignoni, Angela Bulloch, Michael Buthe, Rainer Fetting, Tue Greenfort, Jeppe Hein and Jean Tinguely.