

My Very Gestures
Installation view
Salzburger Kunstverein, 2008



Out of the Ordinary

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ometimes when we wake, regardless of what the day ahead might bring, the apparitions that have come to us in the night or early morning, cast a shadow in our heads. Looking at Antje Majewski's multifarious photographs, paintings, videos, and installations from the last fifteen years or so puts me exactly in that odd, in-between state of mind. A state, in which dream figures and their imaginative realm make their presence felt and color our perception of the objective world. Perhaps this is also what we are witnessing in the artist's self-portrait included amongst her series of black-and-white photographs mounted in mirror frames in *My Very Gestures... Enchanted* (2001). It shows Majewski holding one hand up to her forehead and with her eyes rolled partly back as if in, or performing that state when our sense of the real is inflected or haunted by visions. Apparently, and sometimes shockingly, the otherworldly, glowing protagonists or beings in these fading dreams or visions—whether statues or spirits and however strange, colorful or sexually-loaded they may be—are all aspects of ourselves. But they also exist outside of you, in your relationship to everything you have ever experienced, half-remembered, or projected onto the territory beyond what you think you know and have understood.

Take for example, the dark, changeable, and powerful Polish coal mine spirit called Skarbek in Majewski and author Ingo Niermann's 2005 collaborative dance theater piece of the same name, or the fake tribe of face-painted, robed, and hooded figures in the artist's series of paintings *L'invitation au voyage, Teil 4: Masken* (1999–2001). Works like these might be described as entailing the appearance of figures, whether their setting is a kind of heightened version of normality somewhere in the world, mythical, pure fantasy, or some kind of mixture of these. In the exhibition also titled *My Very Gestures* (2008), which, though by no means a complete retrospective, is nevertheless a kind of "looking back" or selected survey, these scenes and scenarios not only sit along side each other, they coexist. Sometimes the artist achieves this through a fixing of their outline, contours, texture, and tone on the surface of a painted image. Elsewhere they come to life through sculptural props, costumes, and narratives of a video. There are other equally important thematic threads in her work, principal amongst them a kind of postmodern social realism in which the artist often uses television and travel images. But in the exhibition *My Very Gestures*, and this accompanying catalogue, it is the idea that art might offer a place where the real world mingles with the imagined one, that bring Majewski's

varied works into conversation with each other. Pointing to the realism of other works, Majewski would say that these two aspects of her work are codependent, or won't exist without each other. Her imagination is not an escape from what can be experienced or observed, rather for the artist: "the imaginary or the visionary is kind of enfolded into the fabric of the real."¹ Perhaps the best example of how this works for the artist is Skarbek, a legendary spirit who has outlived his Socialist reformers and still haunts the mining towns that created him even as social and economic conditions deteriorate.

Bearing this in mind let's look more closely at one of the dream-like figures in the artist's work, for instance, the spirit depicted in the photorealistic figurative painting *Liebling* (1999), a work that hasn't aged in the way that oil paintings don't, if they're constructed well and treated right. (In conversation, the artist told me that one of her fascinations with oil painting was the way that they can defy time, or at least time measured by a human life.) The painting might be a present-day portrait of a young Dorian Gray—though without the addition of devilish, death-defying magic. Bound to the physical world the real model's misdemeanors won't ever sully its untainted surface. The work depicts a naked youth crouching in a mirror cube, whose front is open to the beholder. It is also through this virtual plane that the figure stares out of his two dimensional container or frame—where space is an illusion created by perspective—into our four-dimensional world. His body is reflected in multiple directions in the surfaces around him, a fact that doesn't seem to perturb this peaceful exhibitionist. (His gaze to the viewer doesn't suggest narcissist self-absorption.) A long mane and classically obscured genitals emphasize a certain androgyny and arguably make him available as a figure of pansexual fantasy, an alter-ego, or a flirtatious muse, existing as a tantalizing possibility beyond entrenched or proscriptive gender or sexual codes. He is painted, and it is the medium, which allows this apparition to remain in a constantly renewed present rather than to fade away in the imagination where he came from. Perhaps he came from a dream and perhaps he is meant to reappear in ours.

Turning to the outside world, in the video *Erde Asphalt Wedding* (2007), Majewski and collaborating artist Juliane Solmsdorf, crawl through the streets of the Berlin neighborhood Wedding, bare-kneed and absurdly costumed. Majewski is wearing a stretchy silver dress and Solmsdorf a black and gold sequin top and shorts—as if the two have emerged from a 1980s disco after a time lag. Partly, a disturbing endurance test that is sometimes painfully to watch, it is not clear whether the artists have somehow regressed or are still evolving, or even whether their excruciating progress on all fours has any specific purpose other than their almost primordial movements. The tough and bleak streets of Wedding are completely transformed in the video through their performance, and appear like an alien environment or unfamiliar urban territory. The accompanying realistic painting *Säule Wedding* (2008) shows the two artists embracing while standing on top of what might be a water fountain, thus in a sense becoming momentary beacons for creative or unorthodox use of public space. The painting preserves and monumentalizes their fleeting performative gesture.

It is also the present condition and the cultural history of a particular public space, which inspired the artist's interest in the ruins of the 19th Century Crystal Palace grounds in London. The painting *Entrance to Crystal Palace* (2002), which has as a companion a wall painting with

¹Antje Majewski in conversation with the author, August 2008.



historical postcards illuminating the cultural and social history of the Crystal Palace, and the painting *Dinosaurs* (2002), direct the viewer's critical attention and imagination to both the past and present. In these works, the protagonists are some anonymous teenage girls who chat below a sphinx whose eyes have been defaced with red paint, and eat together in a cafeteria in front of a wall mural of dinosaur models—a depiction of one of the Crystal Palace's original and only surviving attractions. What we are offered are ordinary scenes with an extraordinary past. By painting them, the artist has achieved an instable convergence of the real and the fictional. In the exhibition *My Very Gestures*, the idea of the fairground or international exhibition is echoed in the display and exhibition architecture. The housing for the display of the video *Erde Asphalt Wedding*, for instance, recalls a freestanding fairground stand. The same goes for the striped octagonal platform elsewhere in the room, which provides visitors with an island to gather and rest and become part of the display and peruse the curiosities around them, such as the Skarbek puppet and masks.



It is perhaps useful to go back to the earlier days of her artistic production in order to locate and contextualize Majewski's artistic intention in relation to her divergent subject matter. In the mid-1990s, the artist published a text in one of the first issues of the still existing independent Berlin art, culture, and politics magazine *Starship*, which reads something like an untamed manifesto for a painter, specifically a woman painter. In fact, the text was constructed wholly from citations of texts from the women painters Rosa Bonheur, Marie Bashkirtseff, Louise-Cathérine Breslau, and Tamara de Lempicka. The following excerpt gives an idea of its tone:



“As a young girl I squandered my time with excessive questions and eccentric inanities. There is a time when one feels naively capable of doing anything. [...] I smoke three packs of cigarettes a day and swallow tons of sleeping pills at night. The days are just too short. Sometimes I go to bed at night, come home at two in the morning and work until six under terrible light. [...] I have a goal, and I have a plan. After every second sold painting I will buy a bracelet, until the diamonds and jewels reach from wrist to elbow. You really have to have a lot of enthusiasm for your art to live in this ghastly milieu and among these clowns. I am only interested in the best.



I have a very black wig on and my eyebrows are also dyed black. I can spend entire nights sleepless, thinking about a picture or a statue; never has the thought of a beautiful man had the same effect.

[...] I am happy living here, far from the world, receive visits from a few intimate friends and work as best I can.



Had I been completely happy, I might not have worked.”²

Two years earlier the artist had published the art historical text *Some Women Realists, Revisited*³, considering the position of realistic painters of the 1970s including artists such as Joan Semmel and Sylvia Sleigh. I mention these early writings because to me they show how from

²Antje Majewski, “Pastiche,” *Starship* 3 (Winter 2000): 124-125

³Antje Majewski, “Einige Realistinnen,” *Starship* 1 (Autumn 1998): 24-35

the beginning Majewski made her allegiances, her inspiration, and critical perspective clear. Namely, that in terms of thinking about the fantasy figures, performance, roles, and costumes in Majewski's work, the theoretical backdrop is informed by a progressive form of feminism. In particular, Judith Butler's thesis about the importance of performance and performativity in the construction of gender should be taken into account. Again, the vibrant and mysterious images *Masks* are perhaps a good example of how this thought is taken on board in an undogmatic exploratory way in some of Majewski's work. The series depicts a group of friends and other artists with wildly painted faces in geometric abstract patterns and clothed in jarringly patterned, non-gender specific clothes, sewn from inexpensive fabrics by the artist. The painting on untreated copper *Masquerade* (2006), which suggests that the painted image involves some modicum of magic and alchemy, is also a celebration of a potentially liberating form of performance.



But to return to the recent past, it is also important to remember that back in the mid-1990s, painting (for which Majewski became principally known in the late 1990s) and, even worse, realistic or figurative painting wasn't featuring large amongst emerging artists' practice. Although, this unofficial moratorium on interest, on the part of curators and, to a lesser extent, galleries, was about to be done away with in a major way—in Germany, for example—as a result of the commercially driven rise of what's known as the Leipzig school. In sharp distinction, much closer to home for Majewski were the protagonists of the nascent Berlin scene—still relatively small and self-referential, by comparison to today. Artists more specifically important to the context for Majewski included Lukas Duwenhögger, Ull Hohn, Michel Majerus, and Katharina Wulff, —all of whom in their own admittedly highly divergent ways, approached painting with a discursive vigor and a new affection for the problems of painting and addressing the troubled status of figuration. That is not to suggest that there was any sense of a Berlin school or movement, just that at that time, there was a lively discussion about what was seen as defensible rather than kitsch or conservative or otherwise retrograde in contemporary painting. It's important to appreciate Majewski's work in terms of that context and intellectual climate of those years.

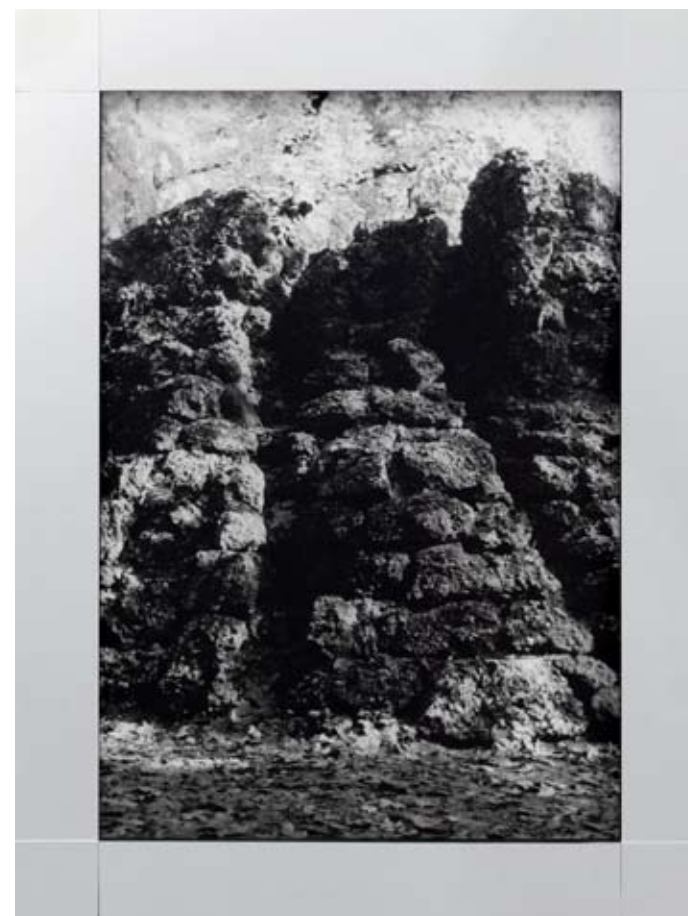


The exhibition title *My Very Gestures* is taken from the Frankie Goes to Hollywood album *Welcome to the Pleasuredome*. In particular, some lines which paraphrase a passage from Friedrich Nietzsche's *The Birth of the Tragedy* (*Die Geburt der Tragödie*, 1872): “In song and in dance I express myself as a member of a higher community. I have forgotten how to walk and speak. I am on the way toward flying into the air... dancing. My very gestures express enchantment. I feel myself a god. Supernatural sounds emanate from me. I walk about enchanted, in ecstasy, like the gods I saw walking in my dreams. I am no longer an artist, I have become a work of art.” The artist wrote to me that this perhaps “summarizes more than anything else what I would like to get at.” To me this suggests that at the core of Majewski's practice is the idea of a celebration, the performance and living out of joy. The figures and characters in her art spring forth from the ordinary in order to show us a different imaginative trajectory.





*My Very
Gestures...
Enchanted*
8 b/w prints,
mirror frames
41 x 30.5 cm
2001



MY VERY
GESTURES