

Conversation with Martin Eder

Claudia Cosmo, February 2012

Longing in shimmering mud

Martin Eder has left behind the “foggy phase”. This process of searching and feeling his way forward he describes with a film title by John Carpenter — “The Fog”. In this phase, the Berlin-based artist comes across creatures which he pulls out of the fog. With the newly found, fresh personnel on the canvas Eder can start with the new. This also implies letting go of old, already created paintings. They are already history, put to an end with oil paint and paintbrushes. Until now, Martin Eder approached conditions and emotions in his figurative paintings and photographs. Also the new works deal with these themes. But the longing gets stuck in the dirt.

A conversation about glitter, goo, ash and artistic inspiration.

Martin Eder:

The older I get, the more I leave the concept and have got more and more to the principle of the impulse. And the impulse is in fact what makes you most happy and also causes the most trouble. This is why I have been working on this new series very impulsively. Not in terms of the gestures, but in regard to decisions. Which means, in this case I have a lot of quite unattractive depicted figures. And I think the paintings themselves are extremely ugly.

Claudia Cosmo:

This immediacy of depiction can also be seen in your earlier works, for example in the nakedness of the painted women. One is used to skin and flesh in your works, although usually in a more pretty, sometimes even ethereal-detached and sleeker form. When I look at your new paintings, my eye gets caught on a butt portrait. There is even a red pimple on one butt. I think that's brilliant.

Martin Eder:

Yes, that one is nice. It is about bringing to light everyday things that are often totally underestimated or hardly ever come into the open. A butt is also a portrait. The butt says a lot about the person concerned. Unfortunately the butt is damned to stay inside dark pants forever. A butt has an existence which, how should I say, I feel a bit sorry for. For me it is about the fact that the naked or half-naked get placed into a world that I would call something like “Community College-Esoterism”. Community College meets Science Fiction. It looks like the pictured are moving in a sort of glitzy dirt. In the mud, in a squirmy chromaticity that is glammed up by decorative elements such as glitter. A lot of what one would call No-Go is being thrown on my muddy backgrounds.

Claudia Cosmo:

The beautiful and the horrible united in one picture. The bodies seem to be trying to escape the scenery.

Martin Eder:

This new series has a lot to do with escape and ballast. In this case the ballast of one's own body or one's own being. And escape in the sense that one can dream oneself somewhere else. Like in the Stanley Kubrick movie “2001 — A Space Odyssey”. I especially love the scene at the end, where the protagonist finds himself back in a sort of children-world. He is standing in an apartment with white-lacquered baroque furniture that turns out to be surreally mirror-coated or lit from underneath with white light. He is at home but he doesn't have a ground. He is groundless. And this is a bit how I see my new series. I'm very much inspired by this moment from the movie. One is trapped but at the same time not present.

Claudia Cosmo:

Do your paintings also reflect this non-presence in the fact that your new sculptures show heads with empty eye sockets and the faces on the canvases look and turn away, see through or only face the viewer with a fragment of their bodies?

Martin Eder:

Yes, this also has to do with the psychology of observation. This time I wanted the depicted figures to not expose themselves too much towards the viewer and the outside world. My goal was to establish a sort of veil between them. So that the viewer is not forced aggressively into becoming part of the picture. This is an innovation in my work. Before it was my concern that the viewer responds very strongly to the figures, also in terms of colours. Now I find that it is all rather subtle.

The new works are also much more abstract. This one for instance, on this large canvas you see two naked young ladies sitting in a bathtub without water. In parts, the background is crumbling off. You don't really know where this scene takes place. One can see perspective lines but one doesn't know where they lead. This makes the painting a lot more complicated, I think.

Claudia Cosmo:

So the abyss is no longer located in the small details. Neither in the painted human eye nor in an insect using its feelers like an epee, but in the whole appearance of the image?

Martin Eder:

Most important for me is to create an unattractive non-place in the picture. Something that you know very well but cannot define geographically. The non-place is really an emotional place.

In this regard, there are three points of origin for the picture. For one thing, there are the protagonists. Then there is the possibility of escape through the non-space which is around them. In the third place there is the seduction, the cosmetics which can be detected through rainbows or the different effects of glitter and gloss. I use these three stylistic devices in this new series, which by the way is called "Asymmetry".

Claudia Cosmo:

"Asymmetry" in German also means unevenness or tilt.

Martin Eder:

I very consciously chose the title "Asymmetry" because it alludes to a certain imbalance. My work circles around the state of "being out of balance", when something is not in the state of harmony but in a tilt.

Claudia Cosmo:

This state can not only be seen, but also felt in your works. As a painter, photographer and sculptor you create non-places that represent this imbalance. Also the skin, the human body can be such a non-place. Your studio, for example, is not a non-place for me. It is contrary to the content of your paintings and sculptures. In a way one could say that you have what the portrayed in your paintings are longing for?

Martin Eder:

Yes, that is correct. But my studio is at the same time my prison, in which I am spending, have to be spending a lot of time. And of course it is very quiet here, you definitely need certain work ethics and aesthetics. But yes, it isn't a non-place. It is more a sort of sanatorium for me.

Claudia Cosmo:

Here I have to think of Alberto Savinio, the younger brother of Giorgio de Chirico. In one of his texts he uses the phrase "Kursaal dei Morti — Kursaal of the Dead". Talking about literature. This has always been important for your work. Does this also apply to the origin of the series "Asymmetry"?

Martin Eder:

I have read Vicki Baum's first, autobiographically influenced novel "Early Shadows" from 1919. It was important to me in regards to its content. In this book, Baum describes the end of a childhood. It is about a 12-year-old child and her strict father who ruins his offspring's childhood. There is also a harmony being destructed. Life goes out of balance. My works show big children. The pictured are grown-ups, but there is a melancholic look back, a sort of longing that shines through. The applied glitter that refers to fantasy books brings a certain wistful wind of childhood into the paintings, although my figures have clearly outgrown their childhood. The women are really much too large for the paintings. The frame is the prison of the painted.

Claudia Cosmo:

They are not only stuck in the dirt surrounded by glitter. On top of that their skin shimmers slimily in various colours. Still the overall impression of every painting is coldness. Like someone has mercilessly lit the scene.

Martin Eder:

The major principle when picturing these bodies is that of an upside-down fish on land. Everyone knows this. When you put fish on the ground turned upside down they shimmer in whitish green. They might even still be moist and slick. This is what my new figures on the canvas look like! Their skin is kept in a grey-greenish shade. They are sitting in front of backgrounds or on floors that I have mixed from ash and dust. So that it creates a sort of dirty mud. This mud I further decorated. It makes for something abstruse to arise!

Claudia Cosmo:

Your paintings are based on photographs that you have taken before with nude models. Here, this painted female act for which a model posed for you. She is sitting a little clumsily and tensely on her chair. It looks like uneasiness.

Martin Eder:

Before having their photo taken the people were rubbed with oil. Then they were spotlit with neon light so that their skin looked even more greenish. There are not that many possibilities left before it looks pornographic. But for me it is not about focussing on the poses. The sitting women and also the other figures represent a kind of peace that is broken up by a subtle uneasiness. This is what it is about.

Claudia Cosmo:

But the figures in your canvases still get stuck in the mud and cannot move forward. Perhaps the sticking results from the fact that the ideal worlds of conception, which one supposes that one has to go to, are predetermined. By commercials or TV. To an extent that one loses one's own imagination.

Pictures comprise worlds of conception and hold imagined spaces. When pictures on the Internet are reproduced and curated countless times and can become a form of art, they are in a way also lost paradises that are no longer able to be imagined individually. Just because they are already predetermined and retrievable as collaged standard imagination.

Martin Eder:

It is a second-hand world. It is not what one has experienced for oneself. It is also a mirror for sexuality on the Internet. Which on the other hand evokes a tremendous neo-conservatism. One can tell that a lot of people don't have the slightest clue about what they are seeing there. The self-experienced drifts more and more into cyber and into something totally abstract. One's own self, one's own body, the flesh-costume one doesn't know what to do with. And what you see on the Internet becomes more and more unreachable. And because of this the melancholy grows bigger!

Claudia Cosmo:

But your works still have the brushstroke of Old-Masterly paintings in which the oil paint carries over into the real. At least the viewer!

Martin Eder:

Oil painting is a sort of handicap. You principally tie a leg to your back and tape up an eye. When I compose a picture through colour and paint, this is an insanely cumbersome way of generating a painting. On the other hand it has proven that it works. Because the human works that way. We have two eyes and a hand that holds the fork. And this is also what it is with painting. Because of some reason completely mysterious to me, painting is very close to the human. Despite the flood of digital images it never died. There must be something in the psyche, in an area deep down in the human brain that likes painting. Over centuries it has never worn off. Painting is a very beautiful way of inventing the essential.

Martin Eder — Asymmetry, 2012

Oil on canvas, 186 × 141 cm

Photo: Uwe Walter, Berlin

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Martin Eder (* 1968 in Augsburg) lives and works in Berlin