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PURPLE FASHION

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ART

MARTIN EDER on repression

interview by SVEN SCHUMANN
portraits by MAXIME BALLESTEROS

All works courtesy of the artist and Hauser & Wirth
Opposite page, bottom: *Dream Disorder*, 2013

Leaning against a brick wall, a large-format painting of an unattractive woman's ass is the first thing that catches one's eye upon entering Martin Eder's spacious Berlin studio. His workspace is messy, but filled with personality — canvases, some weird masks, and all kinds of scattered paint supplies fill the space. Even though Eder doesn't live here, there is a sizable wooden canopy bed right in the middle of the room as well as an open bathroom in the corner that has everything from a fancy bathtub to a beautiful vintage glass display cabinet.

At first glance Martin Eder's art is often inaccurately described as kitsch, a designation that fails to do his work justice, and a term the artist hates. It's true, Eder often uses bright colors to depict banal-looking house pets or unspectacular nude women, but the concept behind these images is much more interesting than it first seems.

SVEN SCHUMANN — Mr. Eder, how was it growing up in Bavaria?
MARTIN EDER — I actually grew up in a very small village. When I was born there were only about 300 people living there. It was beautiful. There was no kindergarten at that time, so I spent my youth hanging around in the woods and in the forest and fields. I had a very different upbringing than the kids have today.

SVEN SCHUMANN — Most villages in Bavaria are very Catholic. Was it like that in your surroundings as well?
MARTIN EDER — Yes, and I think it formed me a bit as well, even though I'm not religious at all. The way you deal with guilt, pleasure, and society. It's still a very strong influence, not necessarily a good influence, but an influence.

SVEN SCHUMANN — Were your parents worried when you told them that you wanted to be an artist? I know that even wanting to go to university can be exotic in a village like that.
MARTIN EDER — Of course they worried. Art in some societies is like car stealing, bank robbery, prostitution, drug dealing. Art is not necessarily an honorable business. But I wouldn't say my parents were totally against it. Maybe it was harder to take the path I did in a place like this than it would have been in New York City. There you're expected to be an artist, and where I'm from you're expected to be a clerk or a farmer.

SVEN SCHUMANN — I read that before you became an artist you worked for a while at a swingers club — not exactly a clerk or a farmer.
MARTIN EDER — I was a body-painting clown at a swinger club.

SVEN SCHUMANN — Painting on naked people?
MARTIN EDER — Correct, it's a clown that paints on people. I was probably the only person in the whole place that had some kind of clothes on. It was very hot in there. Beside the fact that everybody was making out, it was hot temperature-wise, and I was sweating like hell because I had this latex fake hair and the whole thing, but it was like armor for me.

SVEN SCHUMANN — That sounds awful. How did you end up working there?
MARTIN EDER — It was very well paid. That was probably the reason I did it. I was not so interested in sexuality or seeing other people making out. It sort of turned me off a bit because most of them were unattractive.

SVEN SCHUMANN — Of course, it was a swinger club after all.
MARTIN EDER — But the most depressing part was that there were some really attractive ones, and they got shagged by the ugly ones. That destroyed my vision, my world order, when I was 22. I didn't understand why this had to happen in front of my eyes, but they obviously enjoyed it. So I woke up.

SVEN SCHUMANN — What do you mean by "woke up?"
MARTIN EDER — We live in a world that's very anthropocentric, where humans consider themselves the center of every action, the rulers of the world. They make the laws and decide what's beautiful, what's ugly, who's allowed to make out with whom. And in this place suddenly everything got turned upside down. It was a very liberal, liberated place. I was very young, so I really learned a lot from that.

SVEN SCHUMANN — It seems like those things still fascinate you and animate your art. For example, your work often deals with ugliness and naked bodies that are not perfectly shaped.
MARTIN EDER — Yeah, it's true. Ugliness and beauty are very close together. In that kind of place it's obvious. It was also a very sad place. I don't think people found the fulfillment they were looking for. I have nothing against it. They should do what they want. But I had the feeling, quite emotionally, that they were not satisfied when they left. It was all fake. Maybe that's the connection to the work I did afterwards. It's all about emptiness. Ugliness is empty, and beauty can be very empty. I'm very fascinated by facades and idols, and maybe this was an initial explosion in my beginning of thinking about what I do as an artist.

SVEN SCHUMANN — So how did you start making art?
MARTIN EDER — At the beginning I did a lot of very big sculptures, but I gave them up because I couldn't afford a place to store them all. So I threw everything away and just did watercolors, small ones I could carry around with me. The pencil and the paints were in my pocket, and my jacket was my studio. I really loved that. It was so much freedom.

SVEN SCHUMANN — Why watercolor?
MARTIN EDER — Because it's accepted in bourgeois society as a piece of art. If I were to show slides with whatever photos I do or whatever art I make, I don't think it would have the same impact as showing a watercolor. It's a trick. I try to speak in a language people understand in two ways: with the motifs I use and the medium I use. I'm not a painter. I wouldn't say I hate painting, I just use it — I abuse it even. So I started to think, "What can I paint on these little pieces of paper that will have the same impact as a huge sculpture? How can I destroy all the neighbors around me in the exhibitions just with one stroke on a piece of paper? How can I fill it up like a battery with so much energy and so much aggression?"

SVEN SCHUMANN — So how did those questions lead to you painting household pets and naked women — the two subjects that you are famous for?
MARTIN EDER — I wanted to speak a visual language that is understandable worldwide. I didn't want to be like Joseph Beuys, a painter working in a context that is limited to a certain culture. I move myself within pop culture and capitalistic structures, of course, but I wanted to use symbols that are readable in Africa and in Italy and in England and in France. For example,

if you look at Dada graphics today, you recognize them as this historic style, but it has no more relevance.

SVEN SCHUMANN — But nudes are timeless?
MARTIN EDER — I think a nude is always sexual, as long as society doesn't change completely. Nudes will always be around us, so I reinvented the nude for myself. They say 90 percent of Web traffic is erotic content, which means that people want to see that, but they do it behind closed doors. That brought me back to my upbringing in a society that was very behind closed doors. This reflects how society is totally repressed. They repress their needs and their sexuality. I'm not trying to turn anybody on with my art. I've noticed that my work has a strong effect on people. Repression and emptiness and dumbness all combined to create my art somehow.

SVEN SCHUMANN — How do people react to your art when they see it out of context?
MARTIN EDER — I was always accused of painting naked women and being a sexist and a pervert. But I'm not interested in naked women at all; I'm not interested in naked men either. I'm interested in the way that society looks at sexuality. I've started painting naked boys recently because I can't hear it anymore: "Why are you so sexist? Why all the nude girls? Poor women!" Okay so I did 15 years of nude women; now I'll do 15 years of nude boys.

SVEN SCHUMANN — It seems to me that your early nudes were more sexual and explicit than your later works. Was that in response to those criticisms?
MARTIN EDER — I have nothing against being explicit, but I found out that sometimes they were so strong that people would get totally turned off. So I found out that if I do half-speed, it's still crazy enough and still provocative enough. If it's too provocative, people shut off. If it's too violent, too explicit, it's beyond their morals, and then I have no audience anymore.

SVEN SCHUMANN — So you obviously care about having an audience...
MARTIN EDER — I'm very dependent on what people think of my work. I need other people for my work. I'm not an artist that sits on the mountaintop and just makes a drawing of the sunset for himself. I'm in a society and I paint for or against the society. That's something that comes right out of me; I can't change it.

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Analysis, 2013

SVEN SCHUMANN — Do you think that you can influence the way people look at your art?
MARTIN EDER — With interviews like this, I hope so. For example, I'm not a big fan of Picasso, but then I read some historic essays and letters he wrote at the time, and I found out that he thought those violin paintings and all this terrible, terrible shit were really aggressive. It was an affront against society, against the good taste of that time. It's a question of how the time you live in influences the artwork you do. Does a piece of art need that extra information around?

SVEN SCHUMANN — Maybe. Knowing your body of work, I think your newest 10 x 10 x 6-meter sculpture is not what people would expect from you — it looks like a giant black spaceship out of a science fiction film.
MARTIN EDER — Of course it's a surprise. People see it and go, "Oh, there are no cats and nudity involved!" Yes, because I'm not into nudity; I just use the symbol. This is actually very similar to my watercolor paintings. It is a symbol of a guilty conscience or a symbol of repression. Suddenly you see this big black cloud hanging over you, and you think about suppression: you're there. Maybe it's a religious thing, where you're followed by this constant guilty conscience. You always do wrong; you can't do right. You never prayed enough, you looked at a sexy girl, it's always wrong what you do, the whole day. There is paradise after you're dead, but only if you do this and that and you don't misbehave.

SVEN SCHUMANN — Did you get to see that paradise yourself? I heard that you almost died, that you flatlined once on the operating table.
MARTIN EDER — No, I didn't see paradise. I was actually conscious the whole time I was clinically dead.

SVEN SCHUMANN — While your heart had stopped beating? Is that even possible?
MARTIN EDER — I saw it flatline on the machine, yes.

SVEN SCHUMANN — For how long?
MARTIN EDER — Twenty-seven seconds.

SVEN SCHUMANN — How did you end up dead in the first place?
MARTIN EDER — It was my own fault. I ended up in a hospital for some health reasons that I was responsible for, and they wanted to put a cable into my heart to find out if I had any damaged tissue. At that point I was so far out that I thought, "Well, why not? I'll probably die anyway, so let's do it." And when the doctor pulled out this little thing that's going through my whole body, it made my heart go into ventricular fibrillation. So the electrocardiogram went up and then flatlined. The bad part was that the electricity in the building shut off right afterward to test the emergency system.

SVEN SCHUMANN — No way. How did you come back?
MARTIN EDER — The emergency system fortunately worked, and one guy was smart enough to pull a battery-operated defibrillator out of the corner on a cart. They used the defibrillator twice and luckily after the second time I was back. I got totally burned on my chest because they didn't use any gel. There wasn't any time.

SVEN SCHUMANN — Did you change your life after that incident?
MARTIN EDER — I skipped certain habits. When they say you overdose, everybody thinks, "Oh he took like five spoonfuls." Some people overdose the first time they take drugs. I know people who can take grams of shit and do it every day and other people that just collapse the minute they smoke. But I don't need it anymore. I'm over that.

SVEN SCHUMANN — What did you think when you were dead?
MARTIN EDER — I always thought I was coming back. I was trying to talk to them, but I couldn't. I was awake and kept trying to communicate with them that they shouldn't worry, it'll be fine, there's no need to panic.

END