

Staging the Secretive
On Tatjana Gerhard's Paintings
By Konrad Bitterli

“A protagonist in one of Tatjana Gerhard’s paintings from 2008 would be hopelessly obscured [...] if not for the flashlight he uses to illuminate his face. He must be doing this for us, because why else would the figure—sitting alone in front of an abyss, wearing a clown’s pointed hat, looking despondently introverted—use the only available light source to illuminate himself, and nothing else?”¹

Tatjana Gerhard became known for idiosyncratic imagery whose assortment of equally comic and monstrous figures is reminiscent of children’s fantasy stories. Diligent curators see in them Pierrots or imps, who haunt the images or act obliviously within their own world. Shifting between daydream and nightmare, the imagery suggests something disturbing: the critics have dubbed this “Weltangst” (world anxiety) in reference to the absurd actions of the shapes that populate the paintings, and have attempted to apprehend the uncanniness of the inscrutable world of figures in verbal metaphors. . . . But the question arises: is it not more important to Tatjana Gerhard that her oneiric worlds cannot be named? That in these oppressive images the artist captures precisely what language is not capable of capturing? Maybe the critical view of her production must approach her work anew and discuss things that are generally passed over in academic discourse: the atmospheres in which uncanny abysses open up, for example?

Tatjana Gerhard’s figures resemble performers in a theater play for which no script exists. With severe gestures and demonstrative facial expressions, they perform upon a claustrophobic stage whose limits can only be imagined. Even the landscapes or hints of landscapes seem like ghostly stage images—without any actors present. An empty farm, an abandoned bridge, or an empty dance stage appear surrounded by eternal darkness, more hinted at than developed in paint. And even when these scenes are sometimes lit up in glaring flashes, the backgrounds sink into deep blue, dark purple, or black gloom. Tatjana Gerhard’s palette in general may be the main foundation for the mood that permeates these scenes.

It is less a puppet theater that is on view than an accomplished staging of painting in the infinite intermediate zones of darkness and twilight. Applied in transparent glazes, the figures peel out of the brushstrokes and are surrounded, in a slow process of visual invention, by the background tones, also applied in layers one over the other, until the figure and ground oscillate in a precarious relationship of cavernous depth and bright surface appearance, creating in the image theatrical illusions and painterly reality in equal measure.

Tatjana Gerhard’s images are fundamentally stagings of painting, a play of feint and illusion, visible, not least of all, in their material quality, which simulates an impasto application of paint, although transparent layers of paint can be seen. While the priming evokes materiality through confident strokes of the palette knife on the picture surface, the glistening varnish unifies the fictional pictorial space and reflects real space onto the picture. And so, as viewers, we become constantly part of Tatjana Gerhard’s abysmal Pandemonium, seduced by the finesse of her painting technique.

Note:

1 Daniel Morgenthaler, “Physio-Gnomy,” in *Tatjana Gerhard*, ed. Simon Maurer (Zurich: Helmhaus, 2010), p. 16.