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Edmond Gallery

RENÉ SCHOEMAKERS
THE UNENCUMBERED SELF
27.04 – 31.05.2018

About the Self in the Pictorial Frame of Reflection
Christoph Tannert

This painter is a razorblade. Incisiveness is the secret ingredient of his work, which always relies on the materiality of the paint, yet never quite settles down without launching into a conceptual volte-face.

What characterises his paintings, which claim their place alongside the old masters, is their clarity, or even hardness, but also their eloquence, which extends well beyond what happens in the image yet always remains within the pictorial frame of reflection. René Schoemakers makes no offer of reconciliation in the pictorial, philosophical or political arena. He is not one to compromise. On the other hand, he devotes warm and caring attention to his family (five children and his wife), and the sitters for his meticulous portraits and nudes are almost all from his inner circle of friends.

While Schoemakers works mainly out of his private hinterland, his observations always concern the wider global context, the existential upheavals that come with life in an entertainment society underpinned by terrorism, racism, paranoia and fake news.

But it is not just this topicality that is turning his practice into a kind of painterly jam session (following the programmatic motto of his painting titled *Too Bold to Rock'n'Roll*) as he paints in cycles and follows a progressive flow. It is not just empathy and anger that turn his images into discursive platforms, but also the acuteness of his observations – the other's view on this world, so skewed by the perspective of quacks and lower standards, without the slightest discernment for the pursuit of truth and knowledge.

The work complex *The Unencumbered Self* (2018) is Schoemakers's latest coup, with which he smashes the mirror of contemporary narrow-mindedness. This series of images perpetuates a tendency that could be observed in previous series, which were concerned with 'asserting the individual consciousness against the rest of the world',¹ such as *The Missing Kink* (2014/15), *Dystopia* (2015/16) and the phenomenal *Cranach Suite* (2017).

The latter, which was devised as an artistic intervention in dialogue with Lucas Cranach the Elder, took the

¹ René Schoemakers in an e-mail to the author dated 4 March 2018.

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form of an exhibition of sixteen works in Cranach Hall at Gottorf Castle (2017/18), which underlined Schoemakers's predilection for contradiction and 'counter-fire'. His artistic critique of Martin Luther's dogmatic stance, expressed in veneration of Cranach, was a surprise – an exception, even, in this year of jubilant Luther commemorations. Of course, one could hold against this act of rebellion Johann Georg Rosenmüller's admonishment that 'whoever does not want dogmatics to be preached wants to conceal that which distinguishes the Christian religion from all other religions in the whole world. From many a famous neologist's preaching one cannot infer of which religion the man is, whether he prays Jupiter, Apollo or Christ. For if he happens to preach the air pump (as has happened recently, in certain sermons praised by fashionable reviewers, in which the matter of the air pump was explained to peasants in great length), how can I know of which faith the man is? What did Christ say? Go into all the world and preach the gospel. The Bible does not say: Preach of air pumps; but people always find a way.'²

In *When the Saints Go Marchin' in* (2017), a toxic triple pack of depictions of saints – namely, Pierre Vogel (a former German boxer and later Islamist hate preacher), Martin Luther and Steve Bannon (former advisor of Donald Trump) – combined with a *Reformation Standard* (2017), its form and colour based on ISIS war flags and the Arabic word for 'alone' written on it three times, Schoemakers's general lambasting of ideological vehemence effectively hits home. This artist dances with double-edged arguments on a razor's edge.

Schoemakers's bluntness, cloaked in the veil of diaphanous painting, works by surprise. It combines the 'fight against illusionism' with pleas for/against 'institutional critique' and for/against 'deconstruction'. Schoemakers stages himself as the 'Pale King' (see the eponymous novel by David Foster Wallace), who holds starkly contrasting views, confronts us with dispassionate analyses, and then, in a desire to be alive, materialises his awareness of his own mortality in recurring vanitas motifs. Death and contempt for death intertwine. Now we know that the hour has come. For 'the unbound self' is of course a fiction, the 'agency of the absolute ego' a provocation, because it knows neither the freedom of others nor its own conscience, and must be overcome, as Fichte already demanded. In his wonderfully radical occidental world of painting, Schoemakers finds countless pictorial and conceptual equivalents of this state of mind. His painted thoughtscape invariably give rise to a palpable sense of the world, whose wounds and wonders accumulate through layer upon layer of colour.

Translation: Patrick Kremer

² Johann Georg Rosenmüller, *Über dogmatische und moralische Predigten, wie auch über Luthers kleinen Katechismus nebst Auszug aus seiner Predigt über 1 Kor. 2, 1.2.* [On Dogmatic and Moral Sermons, as well as on Luther's Small Catechism and an Excerpt from a Sermon on 1 Cor. 2:1.2.] (Leipzig: Siegfried Lebrecht Crusius, 1786), 9.