

Opening Sunday 5th of May 2024 - from 3 – 6 PM  
Exhibition until 16th of June 2024

Open: Thu – Sun from 2 – 6 PM and by appointment

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## Yann Freichels

### Bücher brennen leicht und heizen kaum

#### A dramaturgy of suspended time

Yann Freichels' images freeze a moment in history, the beginning and end of which we know neither, even if the scene before our eyes sometimes allows us to speculate. This is the case for these two canvases that relate to each other, *Zwei rote Sterne* and *Stadtmusikanten*, in which we see a man asleep, his head slumped over a table. The character's position, the bottles or cans beside him, a broken glass, a stain of wine on the tablecloth, all suggest at first glance an episode of drunkenness. In another painting, *How beautiful mankind is!*, we observe a well-defined and easily recognizable scene, in which three women encircle an incubator in a clinical environment marked by a monitoring screen in the background. But in the absence of context, the meaning of the scene eludes us. Is it about a difficult premature birth? We won't know. The title of the work would rather suggest a happy vision of things in our "beautiful humanity". But doubts arise when one realizes that this quotation from Shakespeare's *The Tempest* is an ironic leitmotif of Aldous Huxley's dystopia *Brave New World*.

At other times, the characters seem to appear from nowhere: there they are, a man, a woman, a child, their heads turned towards a horizon that escapes us. We know nothing of what brings them together; their postures and empty stares do not reveal what they are experiencing or what is driving them. So, what meaning can one attach to their presence? There is no narrative to tell us. They are there, and they call out to us by their rigidity, but also by a kind of quivering, vibrating brushstrokes and sinuous colours that shape the bodies and clothes and give them a dramatic, even epic tone, in the theatrical sense of the word.

To engage the spectator's critical awareness, the playwright Bertolt Brecht advocated the use of means that help to distance the spectator from the action, provoking in him a strangification effect (*Verfremdungseffekt*) designed not to move him away from reality, but on the contrary to enable him to grasp it better through a dialectical approach. "Ceci n'est pas une pipe", let us be on our guard for imitations, mimesis misleads us. The representation of the world is not the world itself, but it does enable us, under certain conditions, to understand it better.

One of the means used by Brecht in his epic repertoire to counter the risks of theatrical illusion and cathartic identification was to insert commentary into the course of the action, sometimes through the intermediary of a chorus or simply by a phrase or a word drawn on a simple sign brandished by an actor.

Do the inscriptions placed by Yann Freichels in his paintings perform a similar function? In any case, they force us to go beyond the anecdotal and look beyond the figurative for what the painting presents us to think about. In so doing, they distance us from what is being represented, establishing a dialogue between different systems of signs.

Let's go back to our sleep-drunk drunks. Are they dreaming, snoring or harping on their lost illusions? The two paintings show nothing of the sort. But in their narrative nakedness, they invite us to decipher the purely visual relationships established between the components of the image. In the first, a correspondence emerges between the upper and lower parts of the composition, between what is resting on the table (the head, the waste) and the tablecloth that is falling back. The wrinkles on the man's

forehead seem to extend, in the same sinuous line, into the folds of the tablecloth; the stars on the bottle and can are repeated as patterns in the fabric. The same structure can be seen in the second painting, where the flags hanging from a rope have their counterparts in the clear triangular shapes that line the bench on which the man has rested his head. This garland of flags evokes a moment of celebration, which would explain the drinking. But the inscription on the scarf the man is wearing over his shoulder complicates matters: what have Europe and the stars on its banner got to do with it? The title of the painting leads us to a different possibility for interpretation: "The musicians of the city". These words lead to the title of a famous fairytale by the Brothers Grimm, *Die Bremer Stadtmusikanten*, which recounts the cunning manoeuvres of a donkey, a dog, a cat and a rooster who combine their skills to escape the death that their respective masters have condemned them to, because they are too old to be of any further use to them. The painting clearly alludes to this tale: the silhouettes of the animals are sketched as if by a child's hand on the four hanging draperies. But at the other end of the composition, on the lower surface of the canvas, an animal of a completely different type is depicted: the imperial eagle and its attributes of power. So here we are, a long way from a drunken dream. The painting is loaded with multiple meanings. The moral apologue conveyed by the children's story collides with the political questioning of symbols of power. The moments of an individual story, that of the paintings' anonymous protagonists, are confronted, through the pictorial device, with fragments of collective history.

And from painting to painting, the movement of this History worries us: "After a deep drunkenness, boots approaching", we can read on a canvas representing a kissing scene. As if the innocence of love were not allowed, as if the threat of catastrophe hung over every moment..

History is also about the arts, culture, works and themes that echo through time. Social and political violence is just as present. In Murnau's *Faust*, we see the unfortunate Gretchen, banished from society because she is a child-mother, wandering the streets in an icy wind with her child. Freichels takes up the theme of the film, but the clothes of the two characters are contemporary and the cherries, which also appear in other paintings, belong to a different, more symbolic register: cherry season or childhood season.

By freezing the scenes it shows us, by suspending the time in which they unfold, the painting gives itself the time to take on stories by superimposing narrative clues that refer to different kinds of narratives. In this way, it asserts its ability to question our times through its ancestral material.

Carmelo Virone, April 2024.