

Interview

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recorded Monday, 23 August 2021

Let's talk about *Today I started loving you again*. The title feels like a bittersweet epiphany: a return to something familiar and loved, but intermittently forgotten?

The title *Today I started loving you again* is from the sculpture of a severed cowboy leg, the oldest piece in the exhibition. I made that around the time that the so called "war on terror" began, post September 11. I wanted to create the feeling of regret for something that has already passed - an object a bit late in the day for that kind of sentiment - in some sort of stage of regret, yes an epiphany. There is this sense of time implicit in the title and, generally, it performs as a reboot and as a possibility to make contact again - to both the pieces that aren't very recent and to the public, to one another.

The notion of absence is a recurring subject within your oeuvre: some works appear like abandoned settings or left-behind objects of nameless individuals which have left this sphere for good. There is a void, an absence of present life; what remains are relics in disguise.

When I make work I try to be in it but, at the same time, remove myself from it. This sense of absence came through using quite representational material from the start, trying to reveal something but keeping it on a very anonymous level. When there is an inherent figurative nature of a work, you can only really project into it if you don't see an identity. I want the work to have that kind of universality. And more and more my work has got a relic feel to it. If you could reveal something that seems to be like a relic but still is in our world...then you raise the question about what function it serves.

Speaking about the concept of universality. Would you agree that your work seems to raise universal questions rather than offering intended interpretations - or at least, well-defined answers? So in that way it's open to everyone, democratic even?

Definitely. As an artist you have to know where your work will start its life - but I like to think that the work can also exist beyond the walls of the gallery, that it has a potential meaning for a wider audience. I've always found myself asking that question of art in general: why is it there in the first place? What is it doing? What function is it serving? I come from a scientific background, and for me art should have some sort of didactic entity. Through art you can formulate really interesting questions about life without needing to provide the answer, the artwork has no real function in life other than to serve as a kind of mirror to ourselves. I think it is easier to make something into a question - so long as it has a universal, visual identity to it. I guess for me it is the intention behind the work that gives it a look of reality... In this exhibition there are works from the past 17 years and a lot has changed within that time span, both externally and personally. What I find interesting is that these older pieces seem to be dealing with something actual - they belong to right now. They feel current. They may look antiquated in their material objectness, but the feeling they convey is that they really fit the moment... And maybe could fit the moment in years to come.

Good art in its essence never loses its actuality!

Yes (laughs). The odd thing is that I've always had this fascination with the generational idea of art. Which is not that you necessarily fit into your own context, but that you could communicate with or bring ideas from the grandparents - the ancestors - while trying to act as some sort of bridge to the future.

By that you're referring to tradition in its literal sense. The latin *tradere* implies transmitting, handing over, and the overall concept of inheritance.

I think so. I don't know if you've seen the image of Michelangelo's *David* sculpture during WWII, covered in bricks to save it from bombing. When there is a conflict, usually the first thing communities do - before evacuating the people from cities - is to transfer all the artworks from the museums to a safe place. So the tradition of art being an emotional soul for people, for culture, for society - this kind of emotional genealogy - that is something that really fascinates me. And this was happening from early on in my work. I studied Darwinism, and the idea that our emotional landscape is the result of generations of an emotional tradition that was passed down through behaviour - of course this includes art - but also individual psychologies; parents fucking with their children, as they were fucked by theirs; an unbroken chain of events that has been passed down and carried from the cave, from the first time human beings started to develop a state of

consciousness. Also, a big part of our landscape, of how we orientate ourselves, is through our language - and yet language is something that you can't completely trust to communicate all the things that you feel. That's why art is so fascinating! It is a language that does have this almost gravitational way of working. It transcends the very physical sense of language - of culture - but at the same time it can be trapped within local meanings. In looking at art from other cultures we become aware of our own limitations in understanding both the 'other' and the 'self'. It is a reminder of the fact that we have evolved very different ways only to say the same thing.

Are visual arts fundamentally easier to understand, and thus less in danger of being misunderstood than, say, the spoken word? Humanity produced masterpieces which still define Western culture, which became signifiers of humanity itself. These images are part of our collective memory and also find their way into your work.

I was thinking, when you were saying that, about how many people go to the Louvre everyday to look at the *Mona Lisa*. Are they really understanding what it is? Is there anything to understand?

Sure, some artworks become icons, inseparably entangled with their own history and myths. But is there a visual lingua franca?

Yes - the visual clichés - the things we use as navigational tools. We can take something that is somehow sacred or belongs to some artistic integrity. If we take the Pietà, it comes from the school of that era and it's a figurative style that Michelangelo mastered, but there were hundreds of other artists carving these kinds of figures at that time, as there was a real demand linked to function. Malevich's *Black Square* is totally on its own but if you look deeper, there was a precedent. There was a cartoon, made by a French cartoonist years before: a black square. Malevich knew of it, but re-contextualised it into high art. And so all these things have precedents, it's a constant state of evolution, branches appearing from the same tree, moments of innovation - but there is no real sense of originality as the driving force of art history until the advent of the artist being seen as an individual voice. A genius divorced from the world, floating in a parallel world of inspiration and insight - nothing to do with skill but uniqueness.

Comparing the earlier with the more recent works, it's striking to me that your communicatory style has become, if I may, more gentle or even tender.

Definitely; I would say the earlier work is coming much more from a position of confrontation, of anger, brutally pushing my way into the sphere, discovering for myself what *art* is and my relationship to it. I was really trying to figure out how my perspective even belonged in the panoply of art. The thing that has changed with time is that I have more courage to trust intuitive aspects rather than a certain idea. In my earlier work, I was working from an idea - articulating and constructing it, building a visual representation of a thought. Whereas the later works moved away from needing or wanting a definitive statement. I actually want the work to be more open, more full of these kinds of difficult to answer questions - not to understand it all, not to hide behind some sort of concept. I work with this hope that the art will bring us closer together. In the end I am fascinated in by finding the common aspect of humanity rather than accentuating difference.

This is what I meant with a more tender, maybe even a forgiving view on human existence. You intend your work to open a space that enables communication, that facilitates thought and, importantly, that offers the possibility to get in touch with each other.

This has come with time, with age, with being a parent, with acceptance, but also one of the big factors - when you are young of course you are full of all the desire to be seen, noticed, successful, to fit into the moment. With time I grew to realise that the moment for my work, the projected relationship I have with my audience, is not necessarily the first moment it is created and exhibited, but much later in the future. Pretty much the opposite of current contemporary art practice in which the artist is sent straight out into the world, and if rejected is discarded - especially by the market. This exhibition in Galerie Michael Haas is a unique opportunity: To work with a curator and to have the chance to exhibit works from the last 17 years is pretty much unheard of. We are making a museum-like exhibition in a gallery - a sign of the unique status of Galerie Michael Haas itself. Over the years I was able to show the same piece in different group exhibitions with different curatorial themes - the very same work - and you get to see how it is changing with different contexts, and evolving through these encounters, so that the work itself becomes like something you become a parent to. You want it to go off in the world, live its life, do its thing. And I kind of like seeing this way in which the work evolves into its own narrative, its own space.

Becoming independent?

Yes - independent, having a life on its own. I find it fascinating and that's the thing I'm really hopeful about. It's a transcendental thing of the work operating - there is some kind of functionality that I am after. Which is not only to make art, but to make something that really keys in to existence, that has a chance to ... how can I describe it ... if I could imagine being able to communicate to my children's children's grandchildren - that I never personally will meet - but if they could look at the work they could feel something. I think this is what you said earlier: if art is good then it still moves and touches you - and you can look at a painting from the Middle Ages, don't even understand all its symbolism, but you feel something. And it has something to do with the feeling of the person, the human being that was there at the time of making it. I think returning to what you called absence is really key - it really is. I notice it more and more - and it was something that grew through accident. I started to realize that what was missing gave a big power to what was there. Now I am pre-empting my own absence, creating works which already have the feeling of another time.

Your subjects often connote functionality, yet they are anything but functional objects: a familiarity with something indeterminably missing. They are *unheimlich*! The uncanny!

Absolutely! It's very much about taking nothing for granted. Going back to the bronze megaphone that looks like a relic from ancient Greece but is a contemporary object - but again it's in a vitrine, it's totally not functioning anymore - but the idea that it encompasses dialogue or protest is current. Yet the fact that it is inaccessible, or from the past, once more questions how it is functioning in the present. That is a big aspect of my work. Are we really gripping our world? Are we really able to save it?

So you have to fight for hope?

Yes. If you don't care, you wouldn't even do it. The fact of caring delivers enough energy, commitment and desire to remind yourself of how beautiful this place, this world is. Personally, I need it too. As I got older, certain things became more mundane. You have to be constantly on your guard not just to disappear into some somnambulant state of semi-depression. And we all know that. For me the world is such an enormously, incredibly fascinating thing. The way everything interacts, things grow, things move, things are - it is magic. We are so programmed as human beings to want to define, to label, and categorise things, while we actually should be trying much harder to find the connection between things. We have to try and take everything on board at

the same time. Not in a hippy spiritual way but simply to try harder to look behind the reasons that things are the way they are. It's a very big and seemingly perilous moment in human history right now. Especially new is that after centuries of exploiting its raw materials we are finally aware of our own impact on the very planet on which we live. The awareness of this era, of the anthropocene, combined with our technological ability instantly to see everything that occurs on this small planet means that there is no place to hide anymore - which makes for a very cold, hard bright light. And we all need some romance in our lives, a cosy place to dream, to love. But as in Francisco Goya's imagery, the ghosts and demons of our history have come back to haunt us. It's up to us to shine a brighter light into the darkness, to bring it all home, and to look long and hard at the things which frighten us - to be better able to find some peace and inspiration to keep dreaming of a future. *If not now then when?*