

About the painter...

About ten years ago, when I first presented Ernst Ferdinand Wondrusch in the "Galerie in der Blutgasse", he was somewhat like a "whiz kid". Even before the opening of the exhibition, all his paintings were sold. The press also attested to his great talent.

With his narrative paintings that seemed so graphically readable, he broke into the Viennese art scene – then dominated by abstract, intellectual tendencies – like a whirlwind. At the same time he was, and still is, an offspring of those abstract painters. He is curious and was simply not satisfied with just the tension and structure of surfaces, which has made him want to express and manifest his messages in a language different from, or at least clearer than, mere pictorial devices. He has never given up the two decisive components of his artistic endeavors: a concrete tendency based on abstract painting and oil as the most adaptable means of expressing himself.

In this light, Ernst-Ferdinand Wondrusch, born in the 15th district of Vienna in 1949, can be seen as a conservative painter. He has remained suspicious of the various trends in art as well as the use of acryl. That I may call him "modern" with more success today than eleven years ago has more to do with the return of the international art scene to handed-down values of art (which naturally include the taken-in values of the most recent art history, the intense realization of an "abstract universal language" from Kandinsky to Yves Klein's monochromes, as well as the purgatory of the informal and the frugality of concept art) than with Wondrusch's own development. The debate about realism is in full sweep; the object as a means of communication with the "many" or at least the majority has become a topic of serious discussion, and pictorial qualities, values, lines, and colors are no longer dispensable additions for the "pure" picture as in the 70's. Wondrusch may now appeal to a broader public as an artist than I valued him to be in the 60's.

Indeed, he has developed, and it would be unjust to judge a man in his early 30's with the final rigidity that befits monuments. He has developed a style of precision and simplification, one that leaves nothing to chance. Had he needed in earlier years the stimulation, such as Leonardo da Vinci found in the structures of the marble slab on his father's bar, through scratching the painting's surface and distilling from these signs the subconscious messages for all, Wondrusch, nowadays, is stimulated by the un-reflected messages of all – from passersby, onlookers, the impatient or those that linger – and more and more captures these spontaneous moments as if with a camera. His output, more pictorial than ever before, confines itself to the obvious situations that – in his eyes – contain enough subtlety without needing additional clarifying or obscuring symbols and signals. As far as that goes, Wondrusch counts on the development of the observer – insofar as he is a humanist, a positivist – to recognize the dominance of the rational over the merely emotionally driven. Although he believes in man's ability to decide by means of logic and clearness of thought, the inner tension of his works owes much to the situation he depicts, which shows man in his confusion, loneliness, and exposure.

By the age of twenty Wondrusch remained true to this message, despite his earlier use and acceptance of coincidence and "drawing" style. But he has left behind the extreme situations; the incomprehensible,

the grotesque, the pre- and a- logical extremes of human existence in the everyday situations of a street-scene mean more to him. Still, he is involved with man in his isolation, expulsion, and inability to communicate. By showing this loneliness – this act of passing one another by and moving apart – through everyday events, the message becomes more direct and understandable. His pictures are supposed give something to think about, impetus, and thus Wondrusch is a moralist. His topics are the loss of warmth among people and their world and the consequences thereof: loss of language, loss of color, deathly silence.

His paintings are reports from life, shortly before a new ice age, and as such are related to Edward Hopper's American landscapes of the absence of relationships between people and their fall from nature into the traction of an orthopedic bed of technology. Perhaps more related than the artist would like to accept. When judging the "genesis" he has indeed become more careful and philanthropic. More than ten years ago he condemned man – he was at fault, and each individual was responsible and, therefore, condemned to lifelong isolation – whereas, today his pictures show a warmth that reflects the painter's liking for man in spite of the depicted coldness and indifference. Wondrusch likes man, but has no sympathy for him. Unsparingly, he portrays man's entanglement in technology. But he no longer condemns. About ten years ago, on the occasion of the "Exhibition of New Realists" in Graz, I wrote:

"Ernst Ferdinand Wondrusch has understood and painted man as a marionette, strung on his self-fabricated clockwork of civilization. People in extreme situations, in the act of defecating, behind technological bars, absolutely isolated. A cell, an inhabitant of a cell, a prisoner of himself. Or: a soccer team, who, brainless and without features, play out a ritual game of aggressiveness according to strange, unintelligible rules. Or: the big, fat bogey-man squatting on top of a pyramid surrounded by underlings who act as if welded to an assembly-line. Monotonous. Mechanical beings. Cyborgs. The dehumanized world of man caught in a false frame of reference – trapped."

Men have always been trapped. Today in his pictures, a group of them in front of a sunken ship, a ship sinking them: the expressionless blue sky, the sea stiffly gray-blue, the beach a burnt out blackish blue, the people as frozen silhouettes. They gaze without any interaction, perhaps not even seeing. A ship sinking or sunk, whether it was theirs or not is immaterial; objects don't relate to each other anyway, and the people are like objects.

He paints in series, in all possible variations, to see and portray more precisely. From one picture to another, nature and her observers cool off more and more. Ice age. Doomsday. If there is guilt, then to those who chose this frame of reference – freedom is the freedom to choose. The frame of reference changes the person who selects it. There is no system of one-way streets.

Ernst Ferdinand Wondrusch is a diagnostician through the means of "the expressive tradition of existentially engaged art" and an increasingly unpretentious moralist. When he reached a dead end in his development, – caused by the merciless commercial exploitation of his young talent – he just stopped painting. In the five years of his chrysalis stage his inner structure metamorphosed; the bumpiness of the caterpillar shed to become the imago he is today: simple and poorer, in the sense of modesty.

Of course, he followed his own path at a time when there was no demand for

what he painted. His unwavering unconcern for what was fashionable at the moment, and his acute understanding of himself and his fellow men, benefited his work. Even if what he used to paint and today paints should find more acceptance on the art

market and from art critics than at the beginning of his artistic career, I am sure this favorable change of times and tastes will not lead him astray from himself.

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