

Stages in the paintings of E.-F. Wondrusch

I In the middle of the 90's, the rising star of the art scene in the late 60's – as he was called by Prof. Otto Staininger, Director of the "Künstlerhaus" (House of Artists) in Vienna – was again leaning heavily on tubes of color paint, as usual oils. Back then he had begun with a very cool style of painting, which leaned strongly toward perfection, preferably using earthy colors in nuances of brown. Now his renderings are incomparably looser, full of gestures, and more expressive. For example, "Picture for Uzzi" (1996-7), or the tightly turbulent "In from the Storm" (1996-98). Wondrusch says, "The paintings know how they want to become." This leads to the "Un-taken Sea Voyages of Odysseus" (1988-97), a truly long – indeed, lifelong-journey. A burning red-black is his "Elleno Sky" (1996-98). On the other hand, "Yum Yum under the Lemon Tree" (1996-7) is musically cheerful, painted in strong yellows and greens in front of a blue sky. Many of these paintings, including "Yum Yum", tend to be pictorial objects with colored frames that often include commonplace color reproductions such as flower representations or Pin-Ups: for example, "How pretty You Are!" (1995-97).

Totally object is "Game of Life" (1991-98), an assemblage of playing cards in an accentuated cross form. The painter sees the cross as an archetypical sign: "Vertically, the view from the Earth to the stars to the godly (whatever that word might mean), and horizontally, the view along the wide horizon of everything worldly." The extremely long time he spends on a work is obvious in Wondrusch's new paintings. "Sometimes the paintings refuse to speak with me" is his explanation, whereupon he gives them – and sometimes himself – a rest.

II There were several pauses between Ernst Ferdinand's artistic periods. One was soon after his brilliant start as a painter, which I can still remember well. It was almost without parallel in the Viennese art scene thirty years ago. The twenty year-old Wondrusch's 1969 debut in the gallery "Junge Generation" (Young Generation) in Vienna's Blutgasse (where we then had our ceramic atelier) was a real sensation.

"...a stunningly early maturity." (Gerhard Mayer, Presse)

"...Even before the opening of the exhibition, all his paintings were sold. The press also attested to his great talent." (Prof. Otto Steininger, Director of the Künstlerhaus, Vienna)

"...The Gallery Young Generation brought the highly talented, just twenty year-old Ernst-Ferdinand Wondrusch directly from the Academy of Applied Arts." (K.-H. Roschitz, Kurier)

"...the youngest branch on the tree of the Viennese School of Fantastic Realism." (Prof. Johann Muschik, Express and Salzburger Nachrichten) Here the endearing Johann Muschik, who – before he passed away almost twenty years ago – liked to call himself the "world master of art critics", was mistaken. Although Wondrusch's early works contained elements of surrealism, he never developed in the direction of

the Viennese School!

"...He broke into the Viennese art scene – then dominated by abstract, intellectual tendencies – like a whirlwind." wrote Otto Staininger, who discovered the Academy student of Prof. Herbert Tasquil through the gallery-legend, Dr. Kerschbaum, and continued to keep track of his progress. Wondrusch's emergence is comparable to the 1968 breakthrough of the reality painters (Franz Ringel, Wolfgang Herzig, and the others) in the Viennese "Secession". At the time a strong, textual counterpoint: "Action Paintings", Human-machine-technical-vivisections, as in former spare-part surgery. It clearly awakens memories of Orwell. The young artist spoke of reading the novels "We" by Sergej Samjatin and Huxley's "Brave New World".

A twenty year-old moralist masterly presents his negative utopias to us. "Today, twenty years later, we have already left these utopias behind us!" exclaims Wondrusch.

III In the middle of the 70's, after living for a while in California, the painter freed his human subjects from their "extreme situations". There now appeared several quiet landscape paintings, in their centers a visible, inner strength-like "energy field". In the second half of the 70's, as reported in the 1982 catalogue: "there was no continual work as a painter (stage design and film architect)". This was followed in the early 80's by a very impressive series in black oil crayon, portraying sinking ships and silhouette-like, shadowy figures between "tribute" and "disregard", which belongs to one of the best Wondrusch series.

IV In the middle of the 80's the artist began his commissioned works. A 64m long oil painting, for Austrian publicity in the United States, illustrates Austria's music history; works are also created for the casinos in Vienna and Baden, such as the painting "Hommage to Hans Zatzka." Hans Zatzka (1859-1945), now little known, was an early member of the Vienna "Sucession" and creator of many representational, commissioned works (among others, in several churches). Also Zatzka lead a sort of double life as an artist. He was the designer of innumerable, popular wall prints (bedroom pictures) as well as the "Elfin Ball" which was produced for mass circulation by the art institute May A.G. in Dresden. However, as already mentioned, from the late 80's Wondrusch turned with intensity to his paintings.

V Looking back thirty years I must stress how much I like Ernst-Ferdinand's unconventional procedure in his lineal art career, with his sometimes necessary pauses, as well as his detours into skillful, popular commissioned painting. He knows how to maintain a distance to his art and connects his painting with life, day-to-day life, and with other realities, which gives him an independence from the life-long compulsion to produce art and provides freedom and personal sovereignty. As a fifty year-old, Ernst-Ferdinand Wondrusch will know how to use this sovereignty for himself and his art.

Dr. Dieter Schrage (Museum of Modern Art, Vienna), Vienna 1999