

Exhibition: Mannheimer Kunstverein exhibits pictures by the American painter and three-dimensional artist Simon Raab

Material science in practice

by Thomas Groß, editorial staff

The beautiful thing about art is that it engenders discussion – either between itself and the observer or among the observers themselves. Sometimes one speaks with oneself alone. In such an instance, we might ask ourselves if the object that is hanging or standing there in front of us really represents anything, and if so, then what it might mean. Whether it just appears to us to be simple, or whether it really is simple. Perhaps the posing of such questions is typically European – since art there refers more or less explicitly to its significant history. American art, on the other hand, often seems more innovative and gripping – but often also simpler: one only has to think of “minimal art”, so simple and powerful. But perhaps it is also playing a daring game with us.

In the works of Simon Raab (*1951), which are being exhibited by the Mannheimer Kunstverein simultaneously with his sculptures at the Galerie Zimmermann, this suspicion cannot be ignored. The pictures might be considered simple or simply kitschy with their – at times – gaudy coloring. We can trace the art historical motifs contained within, such as a Madonna with the Child Jesus or self-portraits of Michelangelo and Leonardo, and ask why they were selected; we can ask the same questions with regard to the contemporary personalities portrayed, such as Einstein, Churchill or Queen Elizabeth. And then we might think that the motif is a trail that does not continue.

Powerful colors

It is better to just encounter these pictures free of all prejudices. At first, the material appears strange. Raab, the artistic autodidact, paints metal surfaces with strong colors and then works on the entire object with his fists or with a hammer, in order to give it a relief-like, more or less bulging surface before stretching it over a wooden frame. These pictures are therefore also a constant game with reflecting light, “changing” according to the angle of vision and the distance of the viewer.

Raab calls his special technique “Parleau”: it makes the works seem as if they are being viewed through a watery surface – in other words, *par l'eau*. The technique at the same time highlights Raab’s particular view of the world and its objects, draws them closer, and yet also marks a distance. In the picture series “From Behind These Bars”, which comprises more than half of the 25 works shown in total, it is easy to find an art-historical point of reference. The pictures, marked with a grid structure of bars, which sometimes seem abstract and at other times look like landscapes, are reminiscent in their structure of the pastose, layered application of paint that is typical of Van Gogh or the later Monet. Moreover, Raab also naturally makes reference to Pop Art and Op Art by means of his choice of motif and the concentration on optical surface appeal.

It is not surprising that the artist is actually a physicist. One could call his work a kind of practical material science. The crumpled tin in the portraits represents life traces that are literally written on the faces of the persons. Irony is sometimes conveyed by the pictures, such as when the image of Charles Darwin, influenced by strong blue

hues, is presented as his ghost – or when the queen is presented in three life stages: the final one shows her in the distant future, as a golden skull. The reference to an art-historical tradition can again be seen here in this vanitas motif.

Raab is always concerned with questions of perception, which is demonstrated particularly by the “From Behind the Bars” series. He, who normally refrains from commentary, talks of the bars behind which each of us lives. They represent the beliefs, commitments or decisions that determine our lives. They can also be found in the special contours of the subjects portrayed. This art does not make it easy for us. The uneven surface can make it tiring. It can seem simple, but not necessarily. Much can be discovered here. The question of how much is really brought about by the pictures themselves must, at any rate, remain unanswered.

Simon Raab' works in Mannheim:

The American artist Simon Raab was **born in 1951**. He is actually a **physicist** and has only devoted himself exclusively to art in the last few years.

The exhibition in the Kunstverein was previously shown in the **Wiener Künstlerhaus**. It was curated by the head of the Kunstverein, Martin Stather, together with his colleagues in Vienna.

Mannheimer Kunstverein, Augustaanlage 58. The exhibition opens on Sunday, **17 April**, 11 a.m. It will then continue **until 22 May**. Opening times: Tuesday to Sunday, 12 noon to 5 p.m.

From 16 April until 14 May **Galerie Zimmermann** (Leibnizstraße 20) will show a **parallel exhibition** (Tue-Fri 12.30 to 6 p.m., Sat 11 a.m. to 2 p.m.).