

CURRENT ART FROM AMERICA: SIMON RAAB IN MANNHEIM

Painting with a 3-D effect

Caption: Wrinkled grid: Simon Raab's series of works "From behind these bars" is being shown in the Kunstverein. Photo: Galerie Zimmermann/free

Simon Raab was born in Toulouse in 1952. He now lives and works in Santa Barbara in California and thus in one of the sunnier corners of this earth. Is that perhaps the reason why Raab exhausts the sensual possibilities of art so openly? At the same time he works hard to demonstrate that his relationship to beauty is not entirely unbroken, by well and truly "deconstructing" his works. Raab paints aluminum and stainless steel tins with transparent polymer paint, which he then crumples to deformed sculptures by hand or stretches across wooden frames as wrinkled reliefs. His sculptures, which recall abstract Cubist heads, can be seen at the moment in the Mannheim gallery of Peter Zimmermann; in parallel, the Mannheimer Kunstverein is displaying Raab's sculptural pictures with characteristic "crash optics".

The latter objects, in particular, cause confusion thanks to the relative naturalness with which he so prettily paints and makes diligent reference to art history. There are portraits of Leonardo and Michelangelo. Caravaggio's "Judith" is resurrected as a fragment, without Holofernes. "Darwin's Ghost" spooks around in opulent purple. Sir Isaac Newton holds out a bitten apple towards the viewer – that creates a lovely 3D effect. There's even something for fans of royalty: the queen is represented in three stages, as a young woman at her coronation, as a crinkled, weathered, ghost-like, pale old woman, and as a crowned skull.

The Raab show in the Kunstverein borrowed the title "From behind these bars" from a series of the artist's work that simulated views through the bars of a grid. Landscapes appear behind the vertical lines, which in style are reminiscent of Matisse and the Fauves. Or we discover behind the mesh of a garden fence the comic-like and flatly drawn head of a child. Each picture in the bars series is accompanied by lines from a poem; verse and works illustrate each other. Fundamentally, Raab's wrinkled reliefs are not only painting and sculpture, but also pop art and postmodernism: the style of painting is striking; at the same time, the creation is "destroyed" by means of the crash technique. A possible violent destruction of the picture is also presented, which hinders perception: the pictures appear slightly distorted, as if one were looking through a rippled, watery surface. That's quite a nice effect, but it goes neither very far nor very deep. For even when we take the destructive moment of Raab's pictures into consideration, they are still just a little too pretty, a little too witty, a little too banal – and a little too kitschy.

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