

REBEKKA STEIGER: 猫头鹰—*virages nocturnes*
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When confronted with the work of young artists, critics and viewers are constantly looking for something that makes it different, whether conceptually or aesthetically: the new, the unknown, the still-to-be discovered are all aspects that intrigue, fascinate and often leave us with questions regarding how far a young artist can and will actually go. Forgetting sometimes that what plays a crucial role in determining an artist's fortune is not just a scattered bunch of successful works—which is already a difficult but not impossible task living in this era of free flowing inspiration/information—but his/her long-lasting attitude and vision: the ability to develop a highly personal style imbued with commitment and confidence paired with a constancy in looking at the world with new eyes; being brave enough to dare doing what other people may just imagine or dream of for long enough to blur the borders of biological age and chronological time. An artist's dream is to count on a boundless imagination that allows them to know how to create and what to create with awareness and freshness at the same time.

The body of work of young Swiss artist Rebekka Steiger (b.1993, Zurich, currently works in Lucerne) is an exceptional discovery in the way that the artist both embodies the enthusiasm of someone who regards painting not as a job but as a state of mind, and faces it with the curiosity and openness of an artist with an unadulterated mind and eye, determined yet still able to go with the flow without being subjugated by conceptualism and overthinking.

For Rebekka, painting is not just a tool for unveiling the ontological questions of life and art, but also the beauty and mystery of the language of painting itself. It is a natural act, a spontaneous need that combines body and soul, matter and concept, figuration and evocation, the arena where the known becomes the unknown in a never-ending series of contaminations, visual and conceptual. Painting is her way of being as well as the cognitive tool she prefers to use to explore the micro and macro spheres. Her works therefore have their own flesh and bones; they breathe of their own and at the same time they are imbued with the vital breath infused by the genuine passion shown by the artist.

猫头鹰—*virages nocturnes*, the artist's first solo exhibition at Galerie Urs Meile's Beijing space (on view from August 28 till October 21, 2018), showcases Steiger's most recent works created during the first part of her residency in Beijing that began early this year in March, and will end this November. For more than six months, Rebekka has had the chance to work in the Caochangdi space formerly occupied by the main branch of Galerie Urs Meile, and to witness her work evolving in tandem with her open acceptance of whatever this new, destabilizing and unpredictable experience would bring. During this new phase, her oeuvre underwent a metamorphosis both iconographic and methodological.

On one hand, previous references that had already precipitated in the artist's iconography became more evident, and even began to take on a new shape and life; on the other hand, new inputs derived from the peculiar Chinese context became tangible allusions. All these references have been translated onto the canvas in a continuous intermingling of the conscious and the unconscious realms. The title of the exhibition plays homage to one of the chance encounters that actually left a strong mark on the artist's imagination: the discovery of a traditional vessel in the shape of an owl in a flea market in town. According to Chinese tradition, similar objects were placed in tombs to safeguard the dead and accompany them to the other side. The owl (*maotouying* in Chinese, which can be literally translated as cat-headed hawk), had already appeared in some of the artist's previous works created in 2017. However, in this case the owl is both a sinister and protective symbol that accompanied with its placidity and calmness the creative turmoil of Steiger, the processing of her emotions and new attempts, and slowly found its own way into some of the works created by the artist on site. At first a mere observer of the artist, the owl later became a protagonist of her works, as well as of the mood that in some cases she wanted to pursue herself and wanted her paintings to be imbued of. The use of fantastic figures is not new to Steiger. Through the years, she has shaped a very personal "bestiary," whether made of humans or animals, characterized by the presence of hybrids of various types, and also visible in the new pieces done in Beijing: figures resembling dragons, mysterious yet lavish colorful plants, distorted pagodas that seem suspended between the imagined and the perceived dimensions, adventurous riders wearing masks coming and going to unknown destinations like contemporary Don Quixotes that upon closer inspection turn out to be "birdlike figures riding on a horned horse" as the artist suggests; a fairy literally dressed with a dress of enchanting flowers surrounded by wolves ready to attack her, or perhaps revering her. But

also erupting volcanos, menacing dinosaurs (*running for the flesh (of dinosaurs and men)*, 2018), a visual phantasmagoria, which is fantastic but neither kitsch nor merely conceived to be visually appealing. In some cases, her brushstrokes resemble scratches, ancient inscriptions: they have the same linear quality of cave murals or even bas-reliefs on Han dynasty bricks and remind the viewer of the presence of an atavistic dimension. Clouds, grass, and stones are elements added to the composition in such an abstract and evocative way that they are able to break its rhythm while creating a new one; they embody the clash between trained and untrained, control and freedom. Despite their being devoid of any precise and direct narrative elements, Steiger's works act as contemporary fairytales. They are "forests of symbols" that reveal to the viewer a wide array of techniques, mediums, colors and textures. Oil paint, pastels, pencils, tempera, oil crayons, and gouache result in bright colors that attract the viewer into a visual maze, offering a space where the mind can rest but also freely wander, being constantly alert and challenged by the fact that the familiar assumes unfamiliar nuances, the imagined becomes real, and at the same time reality is transfigured. Contradiction and tension dominate Steiger's paintings, making them a vital, evolving organism and not an ossified entity: figuration and abstraction share the same canvas; the use of a bright and vivid palette is interspersed with a few examples revolving on white color and imbued with meditative notes; the creation of scenarios that combine attracting and menacing tones, being appealing while at the same time disclosing a potential danger. In Rebekka's works, sites actually become sights, mental places that the viewers want to explore but at a certain point may also want to escape from. Most importantly, they are not just final destinations: they are steps along the multiple paths one can take.

Rebekka Steiger's sojourn in Beijing, as the artist says, "caused substantial changes in her painting" also from the methodological point of view. The second half of the title of the exhibition, *virages nocturnes*, well epitomizes this aspect. *Virages nocturnes* is a French colloquial expression that describes a night stroll, a nightly bend, a moment in which nighttime is considered as if it were daytime, and therefore we are party to an overturn of functions, but also of perceptions. This shift is what interests the artist the most and what she has been translating onto her new body of work. Being in such a different context represented a geographical and psychological derailment that challenged her way of creating but also of evaluating her own work. Forced by external causes, she felt compelled to look inwards and face the essence of her painting, her own standards and knowledge of the pictorial language rather than trying to find possible solutions outside. The artist had to be more direct, totally absorbed by her art, so that all her attempts could be translated with no filter onto the canvas. It is no chance occurrence that some of the works have been painted and re-painted over and over, painstakingly searching to get to a final version that nevertheless represents just one of their possible evolutions. They also show a great extent of freedom in taking un-walked paths or taking new risks, making mistakes that actually act as productive twists and turns along the way. Many other pieces, instead, were literally created overnight, just in a few hours or very few days, out of the urgency to seize the moment, to fix onto the canvas what has been lying beneath for so long, and which, thanks to this estranging experience, came to the surface as in a sort of enlightening process.

Steiger's process looks and actually is very spontaneous because it doesn't only display a profound awareness of one's role but also entails a high degree of openness both in terms of accepting what the creative act will bring and what one's gaze will grasp—be it the artist's own gaze or that of the viewer. The artist doesn't impose a precise reading or interpretation upon the viewer, not even on herself. She attempts to push their imagination a bit further, draw them into a mind game in which they may be able to realize that nothing is exactly as it seems, but can potentially be what seems. No solution is offered, only options to make the viewer become an active player instead of a passive onlooker.

Along with smaller works on paper, another secret gem in the artist's body of work that should not be overlooked is represented by her own sketchbooks, also on view in her solo show. Conceived by the artist as the private visual diaries of her artistic journey, they were already part of the artist's practice long before coming to Beijing. Page after page, a highly cohesive yet diverse body of work unfolds in these books: not just preparatory sketches—it would be far too reductive to limit these pieces to being a prelude to something else—but true artworks that have a value per se and in relation to the others contained in the same book, as well as to the larger versions the artists often paints taking these miniatures as starting points. These works are visual and conceptual proof that the artist is at ease working in both the large scale (her preferred and usual size is 190 or 200 × 240 cm) and the small, sizes that she treats with the same feeling of freshness, preciseness and commitment. Color effects, material textures,

brushstrokes, but also scratches, marks, layers of oil colors/pastels make each page unique, a small wonder that the viewer is almost reluctant to leave behind if not to discover that the very next page is of equal beauty and strength. They are an incredible resource, both intimate and strong statements, the most genuine mirror of the artist's mind.

Picasso once affirmed: "It takes a life to become young," perfectly grasping the idea that the artistic process is not just a question of moving forward; it is not evolutionary per se, but should entail such a degree of freedom that goes beyond all conceptual limits, all definitions and expectations to embrace an artist's most spontaneous and natural attitude toward art and life, that ideally corresponds to an eternal state of youth. An artist should be able to take stops, moving back and forth, re-elaborating one's language and history. Art needs continuous nourishment but also phases in which letting go is much more pragmatically relevant and inspiring than being entrapped in theoretical and mental super structures. Although still at an early stage of her career, Rebekka Steiger has the gift to treasure and enjoy her greatest degree of freedom in making art. A blank canvas for her is not a problem to be solved but embodies the pleasure and the confidence to be able to fill it with something meaningful.