

Beautiful Mysteriousness

Christoph Tannert

Orchids and magnolia blossoms illuminated by Bengal light as parts of a diabolic provocation. They look as if they have been twisted to form angels' wings. Tender rouge on their frail bodies shines like blood, the stem in blackish violet, an eye-shadow from the cosmetics of seduction. Added the powder of fairytale-like paleness in order to cover up the morbid perversion. Coloured light stages confessions of bloom. Wantonly the fleshy leaves proliferate, without any intellectual discipline and, above all, without any aid by a computer. Eliška Bartek relies completely on the analogue character of conventional photography.

Bourgeois mentality needs edification and it seeks a matching flowery context in order to help itself overcome the existential fears afterwards by the cheap valerian of Goethe. Let us succumb to this rite.

„In growth now watch it, how bye and bye the plant,
Led step by step, forms itself to blossoms and fruit.
From the seed it develops, as soon as the earth's
Quiet fertilizing lap, well-disposed to it, leaves it to life,
And recommends it to the stimulus of light, the holy, ever moving, Akin to the most tender structure of
germinating leaves.

•••

Each plant now pronounces to you the eternal laws,
Each flower, it will speak to you ever more loudly."

How erudite, how nicely portioned, and how generally true this oracle from the foliage of the canonical magic tree. Bravo. Mr Secret Counsel. This is how to fittingly enthuse.

Goethe saw the highest attainable aim of a plant in the formation of the blossom. He describes the blossom as „the more perfect", as a „miraculous formation". When Johann Wolfgang Goethe composed his didactic poem „Die Metamorphose der Pflanzen" (The metamorphosis of plants) - it was first published in Schiller's „Musenalmanach" (Almanac of the Muses) for the year 1799 - he used, like in the „Romische Elegien" (Roman elegies), the elegiac metre, thus placing his poem in the group of his classical elegies, although it did not deal with subjects like love, farewell, and death, but with natural history.

All the more the flower-worlds of Eliška Bartek circle around elegies and the erotic. „Hymen comes flying, and marvellous fragrances, enormous, disperse sweet scents, enlivening everything, everywhere." That's Goethe, embedded in the fields of illusion. Eliška Bartek has, in her series of blossoms, practically re-spiritualized the rationalized project of photographic illustration. The viewer is well-advised to include dreamy imaginations, memories, and the metamorphoses of historical models and present images of the times in his view.

But why flowers and blossoms? Is there still, in face of the artistically grubbed gardens and garden archives and a true flood of plants in exhibitions - from nature as kitsch via pollen to dried flower bouquets and sound installations with whispering lilies of the valley - a possibility for an original position between anti-romantic new sobriety, atonal colour experiments, and a warm-hearted, romantic longing?

Eliška Bartek has written a wall-tale in several chapters. Blossoms and inflorescences, exoticism and eroticism, beauty and danger correspond in large-format photographs, giving a voice to the interactions between botany and erotic vocabulary.

In relation to this, one might go back to the Bible, e. g. the Song of Solomon, in which he praises Zion's daughter: „A garden inclosed is my sister, my spouse; a spring shut up, a fountain sealed." (SoS, 4:12) The garden has remained a metaphor for paradise on earth ever since, a perpetually flowering place of delight.

The world of plants has, again and again, inspired artists who have sought the erotic in them, in very many

and very varied ways: From the concept of the sexuality of plants, hidden by florid words, to the „Flowers of evil" by Charles Baudelaire, and from there via the architectonically conceived plant studies of Karl Blossfeldt to the seemingly backlit, lucid Calla and Anthuria blossoms of Robert Mapplethorpe, at the one hand longing and expanding, on the other hand as cold as ice.

We stand in front of large-format lambda prints, framed between two panes of Perspex, where the hermetic visual of the relations between coldness and warmth of the earlier panels of the artist swings back to the only seemingly inconspicuous, so that images of unexpected spatial depth and beautiful mysteriousness appear. The source of her new photographs is fed by her Pentax-camera, light, colour filters and exotic flowers, which the artist fetches from a Berlin hypermarket or has freshly cut for her by the owner of a botanical garden at a small village in the Ticino, at Pila (just above Intragna), chosen by sculptural criteria. Karl Blossfeldt, if we look at his series „Urformen der Kunst" (Primal forms of art) and „Wunderarten der Natur" (Wonder garden of nature) from 1930, achieved to photograph plants in such a way that they seem to be akin to the skyward spiralling buildings of Antoni Gaudi. Peter Hutchinson, in his photo-collages without a common vanishing point, called into being dream gardens, imaginary landscapes, fantastic cultures, but also cloned nature, always focussed on a single blossom. In the works of Eliška Bartek, the principle of multi-perspective playing with coloured light matches the unreality of her ways of seeing, too. And yet we find a pendant to this unreality - the „performance" of the gardener, forerunner of the movement of how gardeners behave in the garden. So close-up and panorama, romanticism and criticism all fall into one.

The artist duo Fischli and Weiss, who asked „Sind Menschen Blumen?" (Are people flowers?) in their book „Findet mich das Glück" (Happiness finding me) with hard-won naivety and illustrated and answered it with a child's view, Cor Dera with his neutralizing conceptual perspective, Thomas Struth in his inimitable way of perfectly composing a panorama, which lets the objects of vision become coextensive with one's own body, or Michael Wesely with the very well-known withering bouquet of tulips, softened by multiple exposure, all of them are artists like Eliška Bartek, who collected experiences in dealing with nature, plants and blossoms - but none of them is a botanist and all are devoted to art and seeing in the first place.

artistic soul tends to make the most complicated out of the natural, very well down to the nosy, cold-blooded, sex-killer-like projections of blossoms by Nobuyoshi Araki.

We humans are, in looking at art, exposed to messages we cannot decode completely. We form a coalition with expectations we hardly dare to live up to. We almost flee from the hypnosis creeping into us, as we know: We aren't by far falling to anything as for beauty.

Eliška Bartek, with her artificially sunlit flowers of hell gives us a heavenly experience of rapt absorption and melancholy.

Translation: Charles G. Rump