

## I will fly again

Michael Kucera's artistic journey has never been straightforward. At the beginning of the 1990s, using layers and glazes inspired by the Old Masters, he was painting pictures of fantasy worlds in the style of the Vienna School of Fantastic Realism. His fantastic vision and realistic description of the subject, the unconscious and the conscious, came together to create an indissoluble unity, just as with his teacher Rudolf Hausner.

His preference for pure colours in this initial phase foreshadowed his second step as a painter, transforming him from a "fantasist" to an analyst of a purist abstraction that approaches geometric motifs with a penchant for op-art. Simple, template-like, clear forms that structure the image field dominate the surfaces, without however either completely resulting in either purist and idealistic interpretations, or in "transcendental yearnings" (Letizia Ragaglia). Kucera's post-painting abstraction of this phase has absorbed into itself the lesson that the inherent illusionism of the picture cannot be avoided, because each canvas is automatically read as a figure on a ground.

As, when related to the rectangular base area, the simple forms leave little room for interpretation in painting terms, the artist consistently takes the inevitable next step and translates them into three-dimensionality. This phase sees a series of relief-like pictorial constructions coming out of his studio, reaching out into space and dissolving the border between the image and the abstract object. These monochrome wall reliefs of wood, following on from Frank Stella's "shaped canvases", are highly visible, a hybrid form between painting and sculpture that aims to overcome traditional, pedestal-bound sculpture as well as the illusionary character of (European) painting.

Kucera does not stop at turning to plastic forms of expression, as many minimalists have done, however. The modularly repeated basic forms are self-referential structures without illustrative or indicative function; his paintings nevertheless set course for a softening of the strict basic forms. In 2003, in the gallery Les Chances de L'Art, he exhibited a series of works of resin and acrylic on wood that in painting terms remain in the field of new abstraction, but plastically leave the geometric calculation behind. This strictly reductive orientation is retained in the symmetrical striped images and checked patterns whose anonymity and lack of emotion is however broken by their figuration in the plastic form. The flat surfaces turn into folds as if they were changing to the medium of textiles. They seem like fluttering hand- or tea-towels, with their banal everyday motifs seeming to take a step towards pop art. The titles too – "Clashing", "After Dark", "Dialogue with nature I" and "Resurrection" – all indicate that the artist has sought inspiration outside of art during this phase, even if he does not clearly commit himself to the concrete.

The relief-like plastic elements, executed with highly precise craftsmanship, permit several levels of perception. Boundaries begin to flow in the superposition of figurative and spatial representation: the sculptural textile fold becomes a relief, an ornament, a blurred object upon which spatialisation and visualisation take place simultaneously.

## Sculptures

Folding as a model of transformation, and the generation of form through a combination of painting and sculpture also plays a central role in Michael Kucera's most recent cycle of work. The radical novelty of the works created during the last four years represents a veritable body turn, however, a turn that has seemingly come from nothing towards plastic figure representation and the human body.

Kucera's sculptures are marked by their excess of physicality. He takes life-size impressions of his own body in synthetic resin in an act of sculptural *verismo* so as to match the figure as exactly as possible to the artist's actual body. Nearness of life is on the one hand central, while on the other is limited to the anatomical features. Yet the works clearly differ from the hyperrealism of a Duane Hanson or of Ron Mueck, who paints his sculptures so as to create the perfect illusion of a human

body, and from the anonymous sculptures of a George Segal. As body impressions they are a perfect body mimesis, but the colourless surface of synthetic resin keeps an element of abstraction.

The sculptures, as impressions, are practically saturated with the reality of life, not merely evoking or suggesting a direct connection to the artist, but actually producing it. The form of physical presentation, to be literally understood, is reminiscent of the practice of effigies, the life-size dolls that were carried at the funerals of monarchs in England and France from the 14<sup>th</sup> to the 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. Although not created by means of an impression, they nevertheless corresponded exactly to the physique and stature of the deceased.

This relinquishment into a detached self takes effect with full physicality and is anything but subtle. The sculptural drama of unreserved self-exposure and self-contemplation is visualised in the plastic substitute of the artist's body. In their highly expressive gestures and facial expressions the figures represent the artist as a person who is harassed and attacked by external and internal forces. Gestures and facial expressions express extreme mental states: screaming mouths, suicidal gestures with pistols at the temple, veiled heads and bodies suggest pain, torment, traumatic anxiety, alienation and martyrdom. It is very clear that the artist is drawing on the vocabulary of an iconography of pain that, especially in Christian art, has a long history.

Kucera's sculptures are so saturated with the signs of suffering that they stand outside religious contexts. Closely linked to the artist's biographical background, they push outwards the human abysses, conflicts and experiences of foreignness on the whole body or in fragments thereof. The decisive factor is that, rather than using a foreign body, the artist stages the foreignness of his own body at critical moments. He attempts on his own body, or rather on his sculptural doubles, to find a language for the foreignness of the self, the self as another.

He thereby refers on the one hand to the performance art of the 1960s and 1970s, which used the body as an authentic reality to abolish the boundary between "art and life", eradicating the opposition of extra-artistic reality and aesthetic representation. On the other he keeps the authenticity cult of body art at a distance, making his sculptural representative into the medium and substance of the issue.

Truthfully and ruthlessly fathoming the matter, namely the body, is for Kucera an act of revealing and concealing. The face, a person's most individual feature, is (with one exception) covered with cloths. Massed folds flow around both the busts and the whole-body casts, with a constant interplay of veiling and revealing. The intricately designed folds that we know from his earlier works act like a skin over the skin, which conceals and at the same time strips it off. The process of folding and unfolding, exemplified in the history of art by the loincloth (*perizoma*), lends the figure nudity as an expression of its exposure. "The folds in the soul resemble the folds of matter", as Deleuze writes in his book "The Fold".

Like a form of shell, the fabrics surround the body behind which screaming life forces its way out. There is hardly any figurative motif in the visual arts as closely associated with the expressive as the scream and, since Munch's painting "The Scream", it has also become a key motif of the visual art of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Defenceless and exposed to psychological pressure, the body is overcome by an inarticulate cry, unfiltered feelings break loose. Conversely, the faceless body sculptures "The Judgment" and "Trust" appear as gloomy allegories on blind justice.

As much as Kucera's sculptures seem at first glance to be exposures of personal wounds, they do not stop there. His body material is not least an expression of the broken nature of social and political orders following the stock market crash of 2008 and the subsequent economic crisis. The values and discourses of the economic and political spheres – envy, hatred, resentment and greed – are reflected in the highly subjective worlds of feeling of the private self. To put it in terms of Marx's theory of alienation, the emotional numbness that separates people from one another, from their communities and from their innermost selves, turns the body into a battlefield.

In a sculpture that, in its gestures and by the incorporation of copper dust, is evidently shaped by New York's Statue of Liberty, Kucera visualises the way in which the dream and trauma of freedom seamlessly merge in the late-capitalist era. In an immensely self-aggressive gesture, it holds a pistol

to its temple and evokes a borderline situation at the moment of executing the deadly act. The dramatic quality of the subject is due to the “aesthetic of shock”, the term coined by Roland Barthes for the concept of the traumatic image. The deliberate ending of one’s own life as the ultimate and final demonstration of freedom realises the sculpture in the motif of heroic suicide, removing the boundaries to the politically motivated murder. With bitter sarcasm, Kucera’s “Anti-Statue of Liberty” (Jean Tinguely also made one) inverts the national symbol for the best that capitalist America has to offer the world, namely freedom, into the freedom to die.

Two works that use body fragments are thematically linked to this sculpture. These are the two forearms on pedestals, each holding a golden or iron ball in the air. The first arm sculpture draws on Leonardo da Vinci’s painting “Salvator Mundi”, which frontally depicts Christ as the Saviour of the World, his right hand raised in a gesture of blessing while holding a crystal ball in his left. As a counterpoint to this, the second sculpture flicks the world from its palm as unworthy of salvation.

Despite all the grievances about the state of the world and the damage to life, the will to live ultimately prevails.

The sculpture “I will fly again” addresses the notion of freedom in spite of everything. As if blessed with the ability of the Baroque saints to levitate, it rises above the ground, free of all gravity. In Christian depictions this was the triumphant and victorious motif of overcoming death; with Kucera, unconstrained by any theology, the body leaves gravity behind, having reached the extreme point of its weight and just before it tumbles to its downfall. “I will fly again” – this means far away yet never so close.

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