

## The benefit of doubt

### Curatorial text by Akiko Bernhöft

Banana peels plunging into depths, abandoned cigarettes smoking away, stacks of hands, a single extended bare foot, falling logs and a seemingly humanoid tree stump puffing away.

The imagery found in Joachim Lenz's (\*1981) first solo exhibition at Matèria appears whimsical. We are confronted with familiar everyday objects, but all of them perform strange actions. The protagonists plunge down enthusiastically, surrender to gravity, crawl, stretch upwards or remain motionless. Their bodies oscillate between autonomy and external determination, between agility and sluggishness, or they persist in an ominous-looking state of rest.

During the process of painting, Joachim Lenz applies several layers of paint to the canvas. The artist paints over already finished motifs with further layers until a pictorial scene asserts itself and remains. No wonder, then, that it sometimes seems as if the objects in the picture were attached to the painted surface in a particular way and forming out of it. The pictorial spaces remain reduced. Sometimes it's patchy, flat color backgrounds, sometimes simple horizon lines that vaguely suggest a space and add an atmospheric impression to the unusual goings-on.

In some paintings, there are deliberate allusions to the time-honored genre of the still life. But while carefully draped, precious furnishings and food used to evoke a warning in the sense of a Memento Mori ("Be aware of your mortality!"), Joachim Lenz's version *untitled (book with cigarettes)* shows casually scattered books with smoldering or already stubbed out cigarettes. The warning of one's own mortality seems almost sarcastic, time is already ticking towards its end here in the form of the still glowing cigarette, while the majority of the cigarettes have already been extinguished. What formerly served as a moralizing force now becomes more of a subdued ode to the time that has slipped away irretrievably, seemingly suspended in its passage.

Lenz's portrayal of a slender leg, extending into an elongated, delicate foot reaching vertically upwards, also communicates a deliberately maintained distance from the world. It exudes a limp impression, making it difficult to imagine that the skin covering could contain the complete anatomical bone structure of a vigorous foot. Even the sparse shadow only seems to emphasize the pitiful appearance. At the latest since René Magritte's statement regarding his painting of a pipe ("Ceci n'est pas une pipe<sup>1</sup>"), we understand that this painting invokes, rather, a comic-like depiction of a foot. The depiction is ironically fractured and is accompanied by a title - *untitled (accident)* - which really does not bode well!

Just as we are dealing with the depiction or pictorial quotation of a foot here, we can also consider image ciphers for other motifs in the exhibition. Elements placed within the picture by the artist, acting as stand-ins. It's as if they have found themselves almost by chance in an uncanny context and have oddly come to action on their own. In *untitled (green mind)*, where we are suddenly confronted with a clothed, eyeless tree trunk quite confidently puffing on a cigarette.

The absurdity of such self-activity is further accentuated in the motif of hands. In *untitled (garland)*, polychrome hands support each other, engaging in a cooperative and dynamic movement. Conversely, the sheer abundance of hands in *untitled (column)* seems to nervously strive to break free from the confines of the narrow picture format. Here, the hands create an almost architectural massiveness. However, their concentrated liveliness abruptly halts in *untitled (bigger pile)*, when the body fragments remain piled up in a heap.

Just a few kilometers away from the gallery, you'll find Michelangelo's 'Creation of Adam'<sup>2</sup>, an icon of art history where narrative is conveyed decisively through a hand gesture.

But God's life-generating finger, pointing at the biblical genesis of human history, appears to have literally frozen in Joachim Lenz's work. The narrative unmistakably seems to have been told to its end. Stripped of the rest of the body, the hands, multiplied in abundance, lie solemnly. Reflexively, some still appear to reach for one another, partly rearing up. However, the majority remain resigned to their fate in a standstill of dissociation. A curious, bitter end.

In *serenade*, the artist counters this standstill by sending another motif, that of the banana peel, on an exploration tour of the gallery space, in which he works for the first time. In the in-situ drawing, they test the falling height of the pillars - daringly chaplinesque and at the same time dead serious, they conquer the still unknown space, while the banana peel in *untitled (full moon)* lies there in silent contemplation. Is this an image of isolation? Morbidly plaintive? But no. It's just the empty shell of an edible fruit, isn't it?

We must not allow ourselves to be deceived. As strikingly naturalistic as they are, Joachim Lenz' pictures always steer towards an intersection between the familiar and the unreal. They open up a space that puts our supposedly familiar visual experiences to the test - sometimes acutely cynical and sometimes with an ironic wink. How come it's worth distancing oneself from reality in this way? Because, unlike a mere reproduction of reality, these images express a psychological constitution of the world, including all its absurdity, waiting states and inward perseverance. Smoking, lying, stretching, falling.

<sup>1</sup> *La trahison des images*, René Magritte, 1929, oil on canvas, 60,33 x 81,12 cm, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles.

<sup>2</sup> *Creation of Adam*, Michelangelo Buonarroti, c. 1512, fresco, 280 x 570 cm, the Sistine Chapel, Vatican City.