

Deborah Sengl – *Broken Soldiers*

9 September – 21 October, 2017

In her new series *Broken Soldiers* Deborah Sengl further pursues a long-standing theme of her work: the relationship between victim and perpetrator. Unlike in her *Camouflage* series, however, where the predator disguised himself as his prey, this relationship now is not presented as a power struggle between different protagonists, but as a fault line running through the individual himself.

Wars motivated by politics and/or religion are defining our times to an alarming degree. Terrorism, whether in the form of suicide attacks by those labelled "terrorists" or as the quiet acceptance of "collateral damage" in officially sanctioned drone strikes, is the increasingly current form of expression of supposed power and of angry powerlessness. Fear, consciously and intentionally stoked for political purposes, is progressively dividing our society and results in quick and usually thoughtless fixation on an apparent enemy. The mass media, driven by a commercially motivated hunger for sensations, all too willingly expedite this process rather than critically question it.

Sengl's depiction of the soldier is fundamentally different from the heroic glorification of the warrior/soldier we find in European art from its beginnings in Greek sculpture—just think of the spear-throwing statue of the god Poseidon—to the glorification of the victorious Napoleon and his battles in French neoclassical painting (with its derivatives in other European countries), not to mention its sentimentalized kitsch resurgence in the official art and propaganda of the various totalitarian regimes of the 20th century, in Nazi Germany and fascist Italy as much as in Stalin's Soviet Union and in Mao's China (and continuing to this day in North Korea). But it also deviates from the scathingly critical portrayal of the soldier in the works of artists like Otto Dix and George Grosz who unflinchingly zeroed in on the inhumane horror of the senseless slaughter during the First World War. Sengl's focus is rather on the traumatized and broken individual, the man in despair over his own deeds, the human being who is at the same time both perpetrator and victim. No man is born as a soldier or as a criminal, it is outer circumstances, be it war, economic hardship or exclusion, humiliation and disrespect, oftentimes from an early age, that create the necessary conditions for increasing radicalization and the dehumanization of the "other."

The dehumanization of the "other" is also the theme of Sengl's caustic re-workings of propaganda posters, mostly from the First and Second World Wars. The demonization of the enemy, oftentimes depicted as a wild beast or as somehow sub-human, as well as the way the horrors of any kind of warfare are made light of, are presented and revealed in all of its shocking absurdity. The fact that its absurdity, in our age of the "war on terror," is at the same time so obvious to us and yet so relevant is both frightening and deeply sobering.