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GALERIE

Patricia Waller

BROKEN HEROES

20 April through 30 June, 2012

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The figures populating Patricia Waller's new series "Broken Heroes" are all well-known icons of pop culture, they are creatures of comics, cartoons, TV shows and similar products of our contemporary collective consciousness. And as is so often the case with Waller's output, the works are funny and amusing at first glance, for they present these "heroes" in a manner not seen before: Ernie as a drunk bum with his yellow rubber ducky, Spiderman hopelessly entangled in his own net, and Sponge Bob as suicide bomber with enough explosives strapped around his body to lay a city block to waste. The comic effect is enhanced by the fact that these works are all crocheted. Our laughter, however, soon turns into discomfort on closer inspection—again a typical phenomenon in encountering Waller's objects. Clumsy Spiderman might seem droll, but the sight of a raped and bleeding Minnie Mouse is no longer funny. The homeliness of the technique can disguise the underlying seriousness of the themes but for a brief moment.

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We originally know the broken heroes in Patricia Waller's works as one-dimensional screens onto which we project certain positive character traits. The possibility of failure is simply not part of their make-up, which renders their depiction in this series all the more shocking. We have all experienced failure in our own lives, be it in the grand scheme of a life plan or a relationship, or just the small failures we encounter on a daily basis.

Waller personally views her works as a critical reflection on the cult of the star in our society, where the star, the celebrity or the idol serve as a contemporary substitute for the more traditional hero. "They are role models and bearers of hope, they reflect our longing for the special. Heroes don't just appear, they are created," she writes. On the other hand, inflated fame can easily lead to personality disorders. "The pressure to always look your best, the obligation to constantly be positive, and the knowledge of being observed all the time can result in identity disorders, especially if fame sets in early on, before the person had time to establish a firm sense of his own identity." And the higher up you are, the deeper the fall. Is Hello Kitty plunging the sword into her belly in classical Samurai manner because she can no longer deal with her merciless commercialization?

One might also be tempted to read Waller's new series "Broken Heroes" as a reflection on the discrepancy between the rosy ideal world created by media and advertising and our own experience of real life. This discrepancy gives birth to an unhealthily distorted perception of reality. Clever marketing creates products with cult status that take on quasi-religious features, seduce us into an obsessive need-to-have, and are venerated without the slightest critical awareness of their thoroughly manipulative social effect. But Waller's figures also point to a possible way to overcome this schism: the figure of the anti-hero. For this is a hero with serious flaws, whose character consequently not only exhibits greater depth and complexity, but who also appears more life-like and human. For a true hero is not the one who never fails, but the one who is able to get back up after each fall and continue on his way.

Patricia Waller's notes on some of her works:

"Hallo Kitty"

Caught in the clutches of relentless commercialization, her image is printed without differentiation on any and all objects. No longer able to cope with the resulting identity problems, she opts for suicide, in the safe knowledge that it will not hurt her "fame," but that she will no longer be responsible for it.

"Bob Spongehead"

Losing his own life is a necessary prerequisite for the success of the terrorist act, the suicide bombing can be regarded as a path to "immortality" through attainment of the martyr status. The enemy is faced with his own powerlessness with regard to these kinds of attacks.

"Spiderman"

Enmeshed in his own life, there is no way out. The more he tries to disentangle himself, the more he is caught up in it, without hope of redemption.

"Sandman"

The stressful workload (night shift) and the responsibility for the dreams of all children night in and night out prompt him to question the meaning of his activity, resulting in profound depression. He chooses an overdose of sleeping pills—what else?—to commit suicide.

"Winnie-the-Pooh"

The current world-wide image of Winnie-the-Pooh is disseminated by Disney in the shape of comics, stuffed animals and others merchandising. After acquiring all rights in 1998 Disney immediately set on transforming the character based on market research and approval ratings. This brings on a deep existential crisis in Winnie-the-Pooh, who is found hanged one day. Was it murder or suicide? The mystery remains unsolved ...

"Pinocchio"

Due to his deeply entangled mesh of lies his nose has become so long and branchy that it resembles a tree. His only hope of liberation is to saw the "branch" off, something that will surely not be without pain.

"Minnie Mouse"

Minnie Mouse has been raped and left bleeding in a corner. This is almost a symbolic act, as she is perceived as the embodiment of innocence.

"Superman"

A super hero is a fictional character equipped with superhuman powers or high-tech weapons, allowing him to protect humanity and fight evil. But what if these powers disappear from one moment to the next and failure is inevitable ...?

"Ernie"

What happens to stars whose fame has faded? How do you go on with your life when the media-driven star cult no longer works in your favor? In Ernie's case the result is alcoholism, homelessness, and neglect. Begging on a street corner he is shunned by all. Those who recognize him recoil from the person they once admired, and the younger generation no longer knows the former "child star," for he has long been replaced with new cult figures.