

**Johanna Freise *Trunk***

Galerie Klaus & Elisabeth Thoman Vienna, April 14 – May 14, 2022

A *narrow corner* – thus describes Johanna Freise the space in which she created her new collages and paintings. The quotation from Marcus Aurelius that prefaces W. Somerset Maugham's novel *The Narrow Corner* is doubly apt, since the works in question were created in isolation at the beginning of 2020. *Short therefore, is man's life, and narrow is the corner of the earth wherein he dwells.* The pandemic confronted us not just with our own mortality, but also with the rapid madness of the hyper-capitalist globalized world. Now, one was thrown back to one's own 'narrow corner' of being – in the literal, spatial sense, accompanied by a temporal shift.

Freise speaks of a changed sense of time that allowed her to refocus and 'let go of time' during isolation, in which an unexpected calm set in. Due to the sudden seclusion from the outside world, the artist found herself in a surprising situation: reaching the studio on the other side of town had become impossible, so she swiftly set up a makeshift studio; a retreat in an apartment within walking distance, which has been in her family for many years. With the few resources and tools at hand, she began to document this new era. Using a ladder as an easel covered with wrapping paper, Freise created collages with charcoal, watercolor, and acrylic, combining her painting with newspaper clippings from the newspaper *Der Standard* to map the pandemic unconscious.

On the titular trunk she began to arrange still lifes using objects found more or less randomly while cleaning the room; among them a coal shovel, an oil bottle, bars of soap. In these 'material pictures' she subjects these objects, some of which have been familiar to the artist for years, to increasing alienation. By covering them with torn newspaper clippings, new associations emerge. This experience of seeing familiar everyday objects in a different light has become a universal one in 2020, one that could be reproduced within one's own four walls. As perception shifts, so does the symbolic value of the formerly inconspicuous things: Freise's *Trunk* series turns them into protagonists.

*Trunk* refers to both the piece of furniture and the steamer trunk, as the modern-day suitcase's precursor a symbol of distance. That *Trunk* in its German meaning can also be read as a reference to the repeatedly appearing bottle motif is intentional: 'Wortverhakungen' – word jams – is what Johanna Freise calls such ambiguities and frictions, which illustrate her interest in language. Written words, however, appear only sporadically in her works: inserted by hand into the painting or as newsprint. These handwritten words are relics of private notes usually painted over; here, they show the improvised character of the *Trunk* pictures which the painter hadn't originally intended to exhibit at all. Traces of the creative process – remnants of adhesive tape and delicate folds – still testify to their rather incidental work status.

Although she had already renounced the self-portrait characteristic for her early work, Johanna Freise still cites the rupture of her change in location as a new beginning. Instead of starting from her own body, exploring the world from within herself, she changes perspective and begins to fathom herself through her environment, through the objects surrounding her. On the monthly sheets of the *Trunk* series, a figure does eventually appear – in the mirror, rather a stand-in for combative female figures like Queen Boudicca or the Amazons than a self-portrait.

Freise captured how her own narrow corner opened up to the world again in the summer of 2020, the joy of social life and culinary pleasures, in a series of untitled still lifes in oil on canvas, whose brilliance seems to reflect the fresh, shined view of the outside world after isolation. They recall visits to the Naschmarkt, from which Freise brought sweets, fruits, and vegetables back to her studio. The motif of a pomegranate links them to earlier works such as *O.T.* (1995/2021). Here it

seems to symbolize both the tart juiciness of life and its art-historical iconographic significance as a reference to the underworld – illness and death were still inherent to the reopening of life.

In October 2000, Christiane Lange noted in her essay *Gemaltes Zauberwort*, ‘that all of Johanna Freise’s paintings are self-portraits, even if there is no human being in them at all.’ Twenty years later, her latest still lifes and works on paper can be read rather as portraits of an experience of time; painterly snapshots of a universal feeling that document the particular materiality of time in 2020.

The fact that she understands the arranged objects in her still lifes as questions, not answers, on the other hand, is certainly reminiscent of earlier works, which often rendered smaller scenes and figures in a dreamlike manner within the background. What could be described as ‘psychic realism’ also relates to the unconscious that in states of isolation is often expressed in unusually vivid dreams. But the painterly process of dissolving reality has been reversed in the new works: instead of capturing the unconscious in an almost realistic manner, the real objects seem to dissolve in the paintings.

However, the manner of painting should never become too realistic; if so, Freise ‘wanted to unlearn it again’ – until she had unlearned enough to start again. To accurately reproduce the feel of materials was nevertheless always crucial to her, such as the crackling cellophane of the *Barbiebrautkleid* (engl. Barbie’s Wedding Dress) (1993–2014) or the dark fur of the gorilla in *Sachte Annäherung* (engl. gentle approach) (1997). Animals as protagonists of her paintings have long accompanied Johanna Freise; in *Trunk*, we encounter only one specimen, taken from a harrowing media report: *Totes Pferd (dead horse)* (2021) refers to the viral photo of a jockey using his deceased horse like an armchair while talking on the phone. A shot of casual contempt towards the animal that is little more than a piece of sporting equipment for its rider.

Besides the abysses of the human psyche, it is also the shallows of knowledge that preoccupy Freise. She is passionate about science fiction – in *Trunk*, only hinted at by the detail of an astronaut-shaped pen – and questions of faith and superstition, realized in the animated short film *Kurzes Leben (Short Life)* (2007, with Daniel Šuljić). Time and again, she refers to the history of art, citing other works in hers, such as Rubens’ *The Little Fur Coat* or Cindy Sherman’s Madonna pictures. Her self-image as an artist has always been gender-neutral, as a creator in the sense of the English *the maker*. Freise is more concerned with humanity in and of itself than just with womanhood; two early small-format paintings thus bring the *Trunk* exhibition full circle – from earliest art history to the pandemic experience of painting: *Höhlenmalerei und Paradeis* (engl. cave painting and tomato) (1998) and *Höhlenmalerei und kleine Vitrine mit Nägeln* (engl. cave painting and small display with fingernails) (1998) refer to the artist’s narrow corner in its most primal sense.

Kathrin Heinrich