

Distorting Mirrors

Prologue

„Who are you“ said the caterpillar. ...

„I-I hardly know, sir, just at present - at least I know who I was when I got up this morning, but I think I must have been changed several times since then.“

„What do you mean by that“ said the caterpillar sternly. „Explain yourself.“

I can't explain *myself*, I'm afraid, sir“ said Alice, „because I'm not myself, you see.“

„I don't see“ said the caterpillar.

„I'm afraid I can't put it more clearly,“ Alice replied very politely, „being so many different sizes in a day is very confusing.“

„It isn't“ said the caterpillar.

„Well, perhaps you haven't found it so yet,“ said Alice; but when you have to turn into a chrysalis - you will some day, you know - and then after that into a butterfly, I should think you'll feel it a little queer, won't you?“

„Not a bit“ said the caterpillar.

„Well perhaps your feelings may be different,“ said Alice; „all I know is, it would feel very queer to *me*.“

„You!“ said the caterpillar contemptuously. „Who are *you*?“

When he wrote *Alice in Wonderland*, Charles Dodgson, alias Lewis Carroll, never dreamt what tremendous success his book would enjoy. The tale of a young girl travelling through a land of wonder and unrestricted fantasy soon became a best-seller read with enthusiasm by both Queen Victoria and Oscar Wilde, and later by André Breton and the Paris Surrealists. In *Wonderland* the rules of this world are prised off their hinges: nonsense is cloaked in logic, calamity disguised as fun. Unrestrained subjectivity sets the tone and reduces all standards, all abstract norms of social convention, to absurdity. As if in a distorting mirror, Alice is forced to grasp the relativity of her own existence. Her second visit to the magic world „through the looking glass“ - the title of the sequel - is no different. All logic of time and space is turned upside-down, the supposedly impenetrable barrier between appearance and reality broken through.

„He's dreaming now“ said Tweedledee: „and what do you think he is dreaming about?“

Alice said „nobody can guess that.“

Why, about *you*!“ Tweedledee exclaimed, clapping his hands triumphantly, „and if he left off dreaming about you, where do you suppose you'd be?“

„Where I am now, of course,“ said Alice.

„Not you!“ Tweedledee retorted contemptuously. „you'd be nowhere. Why, you're only a sort of thing in his dream!“

In one of Stephen Cone Weeks' pictures a young girl rushes towards a castle, her dress puffing out with each step. A sketchily drawn swan accompanies her; nearby - strangely enough - a sheep bleats in alarm. This is not Alice on her

way to the Queen of Hearts' croquet-ground, but a nameless figurine, one of the *Wooden Toys for Doris* Stephen's Grandfather, the American painter Marvin Cone, made for his daughter in the 1920s. She is not of flesh and blood (as Alice says of herself in *Through the Looking Glass*) but was cut out of a thin piece of wood and carefully painted, a wooden doll, a child's toy, as is the bizarre castle she is hurrying towards. In other pictures we meet her friend, a pug-nosed bean-pole of a boy in a red jerkin and turned-up trousers. Cone Weeks has portrayed these figures most lovingly, has breathed life into them, and made them the protagonists in his unreal, if not to say, surreal, scenes. But the stories they tell are incomplete, the threads always break. To seek sense in them is futile.

The Glass Alice in Wonderland comes to mind easily, almost automatically, when looking at pictures like these, and if one follows this train of thought, Carroll's extraordinary world, the confrontation of self with self, is indeed mirrored in many aspects of these works. It is evident in the very decision to draw on glass, on layers of glass which conjure a notion of hideous depth, of an unsafe and immeasurable space in which the viewer may lose his way. The colour of glass accumulates, it deepens to watery green, and at the same time has the cold hardness of ice. These are associations Stephen Cone Weeks is well aware of, and here lies the first clue to a possible interpretation: an allusion as much to water's forbidding depths as it is to its perilous brittleness when it freezes. Dreadful „abysses“ open up to rob the picture of its apparent innocuousness. The picture surface opens up, its parameters - right and left, top and bottom, in front and behind - blur. They cease to offer support. Material boundaries become obscure, invalid, as if in choosing his medium the artist was already imagining the absence of firm ground. At the same time, the surface of the glass throws the viewer's gaze back at him like a mirror; picture space and real space become imbued with each other, locked in an equivocal relationship, each putting the other into perspective.

The Plaster Cone-Weeks mixes a semifluid putty-like plaster which he applies to the glass surface with a spatula. The strokes of this tool are a moment of gestural abstraction, of spontaneity and immediacy. Spellbound, one follows the motion of the painting hand. The plaster strokes vacillate between form and non-form, they float in front of, or perhaps *in*, the emptiness of the picture. Surface and space intensify each other, they cancel each other's opposition out, melt into one total experience. Form and forming, emerging and fading, seem to be one and the same theme. The plaster strokes appear applied in haste, fleeting; visible form a mere appearance, reality nothing more than a tendency, an expression of a fertile state. They contain all possibility of later development. One almost imagines oneself to be standing before a vision of creative chaos, an unformed, pre-conscious state. Its most vital property is formability, which, in the painting process (and in all probability not only here) invariably embraces the possibility of failure, of defeat. Cone Weeks points this out emphatically when he speaks about his work. In the end the complexity and multifaceted nature of his own experience

of life is bedded in a deeper realisation of a causal haphazardness of existence, in the recognition of a coarse and uncomfortable view of the world in which the individual exists with no higher order to hold on to, a being „hurled into nothingness“ as existentialism drastically describes it. In front of and within this chaos of non-form, objects and figures appear: as on a fictitious stage born entirely of the imagination, they act out mysterious scenes the meaning of which remain concealed. They cleverly evade all one dimensional thinking, and, in the end, inhabit a world of no sense, which must not be confused with nonsense here. These objects and figures hover lightly, playfully, on picture surfaces that suggest incredible space and act as an immaterial aura that makes it impossible to say where anything is. Indeed, this is an aura of freedom of possibility, a space in which the imagination of the viewer can take hold, unfold, and find more and more unusual relationships between the images.

The Line Stephen Cone Weeks refers to his works as drawings yet, in the same breath, insists that he actually cannot draw. After studying art at the University of Windsor in Canada, he came to the Art Academy of Düsseldorf to study under Rolf Sackenheim. In time he learned to use his drawing implements with extreme virtuosity, to push them hard to achieve astounding diversity, sensitivity, and subtlety of line. That drawing is his primary means of depiction is in itself proof of a persistent exploration of the power of linear expression. At first glance, line is simply a definer of form, a contour which marks boundaries, encloses. Then, however, it takes on a structural quality, becomes an element in its own right to convey abstract content, a mood, a psychological state. Although concise and highly depictive, line retains a characteristic style, and occasionally becomes intensely emotional. It records detail with precision but describes things rather hesitantly, feels them out with care. Line here lacks the cool indifference of the chronicler. Instead it breaks up into dense, short marks that are charged with atmosphere and make the contours of the objects vibrate. Yet this sketchiness of line, this painterly dispersal of graphite, always refers to an unambiguous linear event; and, in so doing, betrays an intense dialogue with objects that fascinate the artist but must, at times, appear somewhat odd to the outsider. In spite of all precision of detail, we sense something subjective, an feeling of apprehension that undermines what would appear to be naturalistic depiction. The contours that outline the objects are really marking out the artist's own position, one that focuses on that, or those, closest to him. It is an expression of implosive perception, is directed in rather than out, questions the personal psychological state, and frequently appears biographically motivated. In this process, however, Stephen Cone Weeks focuses very much on his medium, on drawing. Line, in this very opposition to figurative interpretation, ultimately retains its sensuous freedom and thus its independent language of expression. In its transparency and immaterial sketchiness it constantly appears to be being consumed by the opaque plaster strokes on which it lies. We experience an appearance of appearance, an “as if“, a „this-as-well-as-that“ that makes appearance and reality indistinguishable. Thus, in the painterly/drawerly

process of coming into being, all objects are transformed, given a new way of appearing. They are subordinate to the expressive quality of line.

The Objects A photograph of a small chest of drawers. Dark mahogany, tassels, a rose embroidered runner covered with knick-knacks exuding bourgeois charm: a bouquet of silk anemones in a wheelbarrow, a heart made of shells, a swan vase, a tiny harlequin; in short, a conglomeration of memories. In a corner on the left we discover a man in baroque costume holding a mandolin; no-name porcelain, mass produced, a dime-a-dozen. His hat at a jaunty angle, he has taken on an almost graceful pose. This figure now belongs to Stephen Cone Weeks and is presently one of the most important protagonists in his picture-scenes. Figurines like this have a strange hold on him. Whether they are expensive antique Meissen or made-in-Hong Kong is of no importance, although he does know exactly what he wants and has an eye for what he is looking for. The world of bric-à-brac and toys has caught his attention, but his way of seeing is obsessive and cryptic and robs the things of their innocence. One is reminded of Hans Bellmer's Idols, or of Coppelius and his wind-up homuncule daughter Olympia. One thinks of the Mannequins of the Surrealists, or of Kokoschka's life-size dream woman that he actually had a doll maker create for him. If our little mandolin player lacks true fetishist character and simply cannot live up to idols like these, if, indeed, his kitschy gesture undermines all such ambition, he nevertheless offers ample surface for fantasy and desire to be projected on him. He makes no attempt to conceal the frozen, pseudo illusionist artificiality of his existence, the cliché, as it were, that is his very being. Yet under the effects of drawing media he appears bizarrely alive. His mask-like plasticity is broken by immediacy of line, by the very authenticity of the way it is drawn. He is no longer a rigid object but confusingly present. This ambivalence of figurative expression is disconcerting. The emotional and psychological entanglement of the figures does not, however, become manifest through this subjectivity of drawing alone. The collage-like structuring of these pictures, the juxtaposition of image (which for Cone Weeks follows no coherent logic) allows a dreamlike, unreal quality - an element of surprise - to push its way into the picture. A layer of reality hidden behind the objects flickers to the surface; but fantasy and desire are brief, fleeting, as indeed are the figures themselves who are in constant danger of vanishing behind the very means with which they are drawn. In the end it is line that identifies the objects, enables them to stand up against the threat of annihilation. For in spite of being subjectively charged, line remains the immaterial outline of a form, purely objective, and, as such, serves to check any emotional exuberance.

The Curtain On the title page of this catalogue there is a most remarkable object. It is our little porcelain mandolin player again, this time almost entirely covered by a white curtain drawn on a thin pane of glass. It hangs down to his knees; only the tip of his little yellow hat can be seen over the top. It would seem that the little fellow has laid his mandolin down and is holding the curtain up with his own two hands. Hiding himself in order to be seen. Hiding himself

to reveal more than he is. A drawing and a thing; abstraction and figuration meet in exciting dialogue that goes beyond narrative interpretation but does not become trompe l'oeil. To a certain extent, it is the shift from reality to picture-reality - through painting, through drawing - that is being looked at here, both realities held in tense but equal balance. Stephen Cone Weeks does not define the surface of the objects, nor does he become enslaved by their autonomy as things. The objects are simply *absorbed* by colour, pigment and expressiveness of line, and thus transported to some higher, „meta“ level. In spite of exact contouring and precision of sculptural form and movement, the objects are utterly transformed, psychologically charged, and draw our attention to a reality behind them. The drawing of the curtain blocks the view of the real object; but makes one curious to see it with new and different eyes. It protects its secret; it asks questions but prevents all too quick answers. The subjective veil of painting and drawing that Stephen Cone Weeks throws over things releases them from their functional rigidity and kitschy manner. They become partners in an artistic dialogue freed of the sober constraints of common parlance.

Epilogue

„How is it you can all talk so nicely?“ Alice said, hoping to get the tiger-lily into a better temper by a compliment. „I've been in many gardens before, but none of the flowers could talk.“

„Put your hand down and feel the ground,“ said the tiger-lily. „Then you'll know why.“

Alice did so. „It's very hard,“ she said, „but I don't see what that has to do with it.“

„In most gardens,“ the tiger-lily said, „they make the beds too soft - so that the flowers are always asleep.“

This sounded a very good reason, and Alice was quite pleased to know it.

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