

**Reconstructing a Diminished Imagery:
On Cécile Lempert's *Who makes the solid tree trunk sound again***

The poem by Robert Frost that lend the title to Cécile Lempert's current exhibition *Who makes the solid tree trunk sound again* ends with the question, asked by the eponymous *Oven Bird*, what one should do with a *diminished thing*. In the poem, the question stands in the context of pictures of natural decay. It mentions the autumn, petal-fall and the highway dust that covers everyone and everything. Its topic is a natural cycle where decay is inherent to everything that comes into existence, followed again by spring and summer, proclaimed by the Oven Bird, who is a *mid-summer bird*.

In Lempert's paintings we seldom find motives taken from nature – she mostly depicts human faces, hands, gestures, sometimes whole figures. Yet, diminished and endangered things are omnipresent, as they have been in all of her recent exhibitions. In her previous two solo shows, *So fragile a thing* and *Nachtstücke* they were even explicitly the major topic, albeit in different ways: In the former, she confronted most intimate pictures of herself, her partner, or their children with the motive of *The sacrifice of Isaac*, shown in a drastic, disturbing way in a large-scale diptych. In the latter, she investigated the tender and sometimes uncanny world between twilight and midnight.

What is new in her current exhibition, then, is that Lempert focuses more on the answer to the question for the fate of these diminished things: What to do with them? One hint at an answer can be taken from the line of Frost's poem that Lempert chose as the title for the exhibition: One can try to make them *sound again*. And indeed, this topic of repairing, recreating, reconstructing and evoking what has been diminished in the past (or through time's passing) is dealt with in Lempert's paintings and drawings in the present exhibition.

In this sense, the topics from her previous work are taken up again and developed further. In an interesting way, however, Lempert does so by returning to motives from her graduation exhibition at the Kunstakademie Düsseldorf which had the title *Drawing the room out of sentences*. In this exhibition, Lempert engaged with her personal family background by reconstructing places from her mother's earlier life in digital models, based on verbal recollections, before transfiguring these models into paintings and drawings. It seems that Lempert identifies with the Oven Bird in Frost's poem, or maybe better put: that she sees it as a task of the arts to make the tree-trunks sound again just like this mid-wood bird does.

These quite abstract and formal topics of the exhibition are exercised through an engagement with a quite concrete subject-matter. What is notable here is that Cécile Lempert seems to have taken what one might call a historic turn: Never have topics from political and cultural history been so dominant in her works as in the present exhibition, where we find three groups of works that engage, in one way or another, with the Armenian art and history. First and foremost, we have several paintings that show motives taken from photographs of the Dildilian family who lived in Sebastia in the Osman Empire (today's Turkey) where they had a photo studio until they were forced to leave their home due to the Turkish genocide of the Armenians. Armen Marboosian, a descendant of the family, has taken on the meritorious task of making the treasures of this family archive with its unique photographic testimonies of this time accessible to a broader public.

Lempert dissects, enlarges and recombines details from these pictures in an attempt to come closer to a core of their expression. In some cases, the composition of a painting mainly highlights special aspects of the original photograph, in other cases the change in scale and cropping of the depiction has the effect of an abstraction. In the center of this group of works is the six-part painting *Apostolic, 6 December 1916* that is based on a photograph which shows a Christmas celebration of the Dildilian family in the midst of the genocide. They stand together, in front of a Banner announcing the birth of Jesus Christ 1916 years ago. They are in company of four Armenian refugees who found shelter in the family's home. As in partial pictorial memory, where only individual gestures, a musical instrument held on the lap, a hand on somebody's shoulder, a flag on the table, or an intense gaze can be evoked anew but never the entire scenery as a whole, it are these special elements that somehow caught the eye when looking at the photograph that Lempert picks up here. As in a puzzle, where we try to reconstruct a picture that fell into pieces, the six elements of the picture, captured on six canvases, are rearranged on the wall, in an attempt to

form a new, cohesive whole. This new cohesive whole, however, is not just a conservation of the original picture but, through the process of abstraction, a transformation of it to the present.

Today, a young painter, especially a German one, can hardly work on historically significant black-and-white photographs without having in mind Gerhard Richter's early works (and in this case, his mastery of giving traditional forms like the triptych a contemporary turn might be important, too) – think of his *Onkel Rudi* and *Tante Marianne* from 1965, but also of his works on the Baader Meinhof group *18. Oktober 1977* from 1988. However, Lempert's approach to the photographs is in many respects more indirect than Richter's, as the successive steps of de- and reconstruction put the results further away from their source material. Two other important comparisons come to mind when examining the exhibition as a whole and *Apostolic, 6 December 1916* in particular: First, Tacita Dean's multi-panel works building on historical black-and-white photographs and her artistic feel for their arrangement might be an important reference for Lempert's work (see, for example, her 2001 work *The Russian Ending*). Second, Lempert's former teacher Peter Piller certainly left his marks: No other exhibition of Cécile Lempert's works has shown similarities to Piller's conceptual approaches and his works that build on both historic and private archival photographic material as clearly as *Who makes the solid tree trunks sound again* (notable in this respect is e.g. his *Immer noch Sturm* from 2011).

In the exhibition, there are two other works that engage with this very same photograph of the Christmas celebration of the Dildilian family in a completely different way: *Hisous Dzenav 1916* focuses on a young woman from the bottom left corner. In the original photograph she is half shrouded in the shadow. In her painting, however, Lempert gives her a lot of space to breathe in the middle of the canvas and puts her in a slightly warmer color than in the other paintings that are based on the black-and-white photograph, with the effect that the sympathetic view on the protagonist is stressed. Lempert combines this detail with an element from the center of the picture where we see the banner and a hooded man who seems to be engaged with some kind of ceremony. Without distracting from the protagonist of this picture, Lempert thereby keeps both the historical context and the atmosphere of this celebration in such dark times alive, while getting much more personal than in the six-part painting with its over-personal compositional tensions. Finally, in *Girl with a Book*, Lempert focuses even more on an individual person, this time decontextualizing the motive completely and using but a very small format, thereby departing from the historical grandeur of the other two works on the subject even on the purely formal level.

Two further photographs from the Dildilian family archive delineate the thematic scope of the exhibition and highlight the constant process of de- and recontextualisation, of focusing on the detail and the individual but putting them back in a broader social and historical context in the next moment: The first one dates back to 1888 and shows Markarid Dildilian, the sister of the two photographer brothers Tsolag and Aram. While it is the oldest photographic material that entered the exhibition, Lempert's painting gives it a remarkably modern treatment with its split-screen composition, the simple, yellow background that is even more minimalistic than on the original photograph, and the focus on the direct gaze of *Markarid*. The second one can be dated to the years 1914-1918 and shows a dying, maybe already dead child lying in rags on the floor. While the precise context of the scene remains unclear, it is the most direct depiction of the historical context of the First World War and the Turkish genocide of the Armenian people. Lempert chose to include her painting *Found Negative 1914-1918* to the exhibition – a two-part picture focusing solely on the child's right foot and its hand that covers half of his face, giving it a certain level of abstraction and reverent treatment. The small painting is a fix point in the exhibition in relation to which the other paintings must be read, especially the ones that capture motives from the Dildilian's apostolic Christmas celebration in 1916.

Lempert combines these paintings that are based on old photographs from the Dildilian family archive with works that show current material from Armenian photographers who documented the life of the Armenians in Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh. In one painting, she depicts a teenager who has his younger brother on his lap. In the original photo from Anush Babajanyan, he is quite inconspicuously hidden in the background, overshadowed by his older brother in the center of the family picture, who, still in uniform, has just returned home from the military service. In Lempert's work, however, his face takes up almost the entire, large-format canvas in a frontal shot. His younger brother can only be seen cropped at a lower angle, as a point of reference for the boy in the center. It is this focus on the overshadowed, the inconspicuous, the fragile and the diminished that lets us think of the title of the exhibition again and of the question that it answers.

This approach can be seen in the other paintings from this group of works as well: *Cutting Mint I* and *II* are based on a photo taken by Gayane Harutyunyan in the context of a reportage focusing on the fate of children living in poor conditions in Armenia whose fathers have to work from abroad and who heavily participate in the family's everyday-life's work. In the first painting, Lempert focuses on the relation between the siblings in the foreground, on how they are silently related to one another during their shared work. In the second painting, however, she looks for a more abstract composition, focusing on the hands and scissors. Not by coincidence does this reflect the process of destructing and reconstructing that shapes Lempert's treatment of the source material. She combines it, however, with the face of a girl that can be seen through a window in the background of the photo, once again shifting the weights of the original depiction. The process of abstraction is brought to a maximum in the small painting *Holding Hands* that shows nothing but a hand holding some textile. Without the context of the exhibition, one would mainly focus on the tender, yet decisive posture of the hand and the nails that seem to be glowing. In the context of the exhibition, however, they seem to finish the abstraction process that took place between *Cutting Mint I* and *II*.

The motives from these two groups of works – the paintings based on early photographs from the Dildilian and those engaging with current photo reportages – cover a time span from 1888 to 2019. It is remarkable that this gap is not present in the paintings. They rather stand side by side, complement each other and enter a dialogue – this is, presumably, because the pictures that are based on contemporary photographs lack any clear markers of the twentyfirst century. Neither the clothes, nor the design of the interiors, nor the appearance and behaviour of the depicted people allow for such an assignment. The dimmed colours add to this impression. The pictures of the first group, to the contrary, lose the ancient ambience of age-worn archival documents through the dynamic cropping, the careful toning, the transformative scaling and recombination of motives that disposes of stiff arrangements.

We find a similar effect of detemporalization in the third group of works that engages explicitly with Armenian history and culture: *The Armenian Miniatures*. These watercolor drawings are based on and transform old Christian miniature paintings that depict the baptism of Jesus Christ, the sacrifice of Isaac, or a weeping angel. While the original paintings and their iconography are clearly medieval, the transformation process - cropped figures, fresh colors, doubling of motifs, unconventional formats – give them a distinctively modern touch.

Besides that, however, Lempert treats the medieval Armenian miniatures very carefully: The details that she chooses for her drawings are only slightly transformed and mostly keep the original colors and contours. In this respect, they differ quite significantly from, say, some works of Christine Perthen (e.g. *Hommage à Leonardo und Freud*) Marlene Dumas (e.g. *Lucy*) and Otto Dix (e.g. *Der Krieg*), that also picked up individual paintings from the history of sacral art and transformed them in a way that makes them their own with their very specific personal styles and topics, with the effect that the historic sources are hardly recognizable unless you already know them well. Lempert, in contrast, keeps some elements that are quite alien to her own style, unchanged and focuses her transformative work more on the above-mentioned formal, compositional adaptations.

This approximation to an ancient pictorial language and worldview makes the subject matter appear both strange and familiar at the same time (like the *singer everyone has heard*). In the context of the distemper paintings that were already discussed, and the programmatic poem by Robert Frost, it is natural to look at these drawings as an attempt to evoke a cultural heritage that has been diminished through decay, destruction, or neglect. This applies especially to the one drawing that does not show a miniature painting but a presumably Georgian mural from an old Armenian church in Ani that has long been destroyed: The scars, cracks and losses are captured and in times even highlighted in this frontal portrait of Jesus Christ.

Some lines can be drawn from Lempert's previous exhibitions to these current works: The motive of the sacrifice of Isaac that was the central piece of *So fragile a thing* reappears, albeit in a very discreet way. Still, this might be read as an allusion to the topic of the relation between love and fragility that was negotiated there. Then, the title of the series, *Armenian Miniatures*, suggests a linkage to the *Armenian Folk Miniatures* by the famous composer Komitas, one of the most famous pieces of Armenian classical music that may well be regarded as an important starting point for Lempert's dealing with the broader subject, as she herself reports. It is the song of the Oven Bird that makes the tree trunks sound again in Frost's poem, and for Lempert musical experiences seem to be important

keys to new worlds of images – thus, Cassandra Miller's viola concerto *I cannot love without trembling* triggered her work on *so fragile a thing* and Hans-Werner Henze's *Nachtstücke* und *Arien* gave a conceptual frame for her 2023 Paris exhibition *Nachtstücke*.

As in her previous exhibitions, Lempert integrates paintings that are based on photos from her personal family archive. The paintings from the aforementioned groups of works thus encounter paintings that are very personal in a more obvious way: *Ismael* and *Im Badezimmer* show Lempert's children – and just like *Martakert*, *Cutting Mint I* and *II* the motives are rather timeless because of their minimalist depiction of a broader historical context and their focus on the individual human gesture. Despite the different origins of their source materials, then, these children's portrayals are quite akin in their attempt to free the motives from restricting time boundness.

One of these paintings that draw on personal photo archives is *Untitled (Self at the Age of Three)*, which can claim the role of the second main work in the exhibition alongside *Apostolic, 6 December 1916*. Nowhere does the intricate work of reconstructing, revitalizing, reimagining of something past or diminished become so obvious as in these two works. *Untitled (Self at the Age of Three)* is a diptych of two split-screen compositions that combine a depiction of Cécile Lempert with one of her partner, both in early infancy. Lempert forces an encounter that never happened, yet the two sides of the split-screens remain separated: One side is in black-and-white, the other in color, the children have almost opposite facial expressions, and the proportions don't match. The upper canvas shows a section of the photo that is taken from below the motive of the lower canvas, whereby the expected order gets deranged, a method that Lempert already used in *Markarid*. This constructive, imaginary investigation of past events in a fully present mode is one of the most striking thematic guidelines of the exhibition, and in a way it brings the *Untitled* diptych closer to the works related to the Dildilian family than to *Spiegelung* even though the latter also depicts the same individuals.

The different groups of works in the exhibition thus mirror each other on a formal level in different ways. In-between, in the center of these interconnections, we find an installation that makes you pause and wonder: The *Landschaftsmodell für eine Modelleisenbahn (Voralpen)*. Its central location gives it an important role for the exhibition, as it connects the neighboring rooms and helps them communicate. It is a mixed-media work with a landscape of papier mâché, painted with distemper and a broad panorama drawn with crayons and watercolor. For one thing, of course, it is easy to draw connections to the surrounding children's portraits, due to the rather playful character of the installation and its title – and especially *Cutting Mint* with its depiction of the girls handling scissors and their apparent concentration on the handiwork is an apparent point of reference.

The *Landschaftsmodell* has a certain light-heartedness which may be an effect of the children-like approach to the scenery – think, in contrast, of the landscapes in the tank works of Mariele Neudecker (e.g. *Breathing Yellow*, 2019) with their dreamlike, uncanny, and very tense atmosphere. Despite this light-heartedness, however, the *Landschaftsmodell* does not become childish as it remains quite controlled both formally and content-wise. So, the installation is not really a contrast to the paintings and their more serious atmosphere, but rather a brighter accent from within. (Something similar applies to the beforementioned *Im Badezimmer* that even unites such a brighter accent, in form of the more playful child to the right hand, with a more sincere atmosphere, in form of the thoughtful child to the left, within one and the same painting.)

But maybe even more importantly, we have an almost archetypical materialization of the idea of a (re-)construction of a landscape on the basis of memory and imagination. It almost feels like a physicalized digitally rendered three-dimensional model, like the ones that Lempert used for her graduation exhibition *Drawing the room out of sentences*. The title reminds us that it is but a sketch and that it is a model of a landscape. Except for a very rudimentary bridge-construction the landscape looks almost untouched by human interaction that would fix its temporal coordinates. Central point of visual reference for the observer is certainly the blue mountain in the background with its characteristic shape and its bright color. It is the brightest, most radiant in the whole exhibition. No petal-fall, no highway dust.

Jasper Lohmar