

Cécile Lempert, *Nachtstücke*

In her current Solo Exhibition *Nachtstücke* (German for *Night Pieces* or *Nocturnes*) at *Dans les yeux d'Elsa*, Cécile Lempert presents a new series of paintings that all engage with dark imagery of dusk and night scenes, reaching from the tender to the uncanny, from the intimate to the estranged, from the comforting to the disconcerting. Thus, they are *Nocturnes* in the literal sense, alluding in times to the seminal contributions to this genre by artists like C. D. Friedrich or James Abbott McNeill Whistler.

However, the use of the German word *Nachtstücke* rather than *Night Pieces* or *Nocturnes* suggests a direct reference to the famous set of stories from the romanticist author and composer *E. T. A. Hoffmann* on which Sigmund Freud based his study of the uncanny which he analyses as the repressed, yet familiar, that resurfaces in an estranging way. Several of the paintings shown at the exhibition seem to directly engage with this topic in showing moments where the familiar and the unfamiliar come strangely close to each other. Think of Lempert's painting of a nightly landscape with poplars on a hill, where a human face just so slightly appears from the shadows. Or think of the self portrait of the artist lying in a dusky field, half mellow, half ghost-like. This painting might even remind the viewer of Leiko Ikemura's *Floating Faces* with their expression oscillating between peacefulness, loneliness, and eeriness.

As the human face, or rather: individual facets from human faces, are a core subject of Cécile Lempert's art, her night paintings focus once more on how our eyes, how our skin react to the reduced light of the night that retracts some areas from sight and thus draws our attention to the even dimly lit. While opting for smaller formats and a condensed arrangement, Lempert continues to explore the possibilities offered by zooming into small details, varying the scale of her motives, and creating tense moments in her split-screen work by highlighting ever so small shifts. In her first double split-screen painting, her examination of the human face achieves an unusual degree of abstraction, so that the rhythms of the shifting of the cut-outs take center stage.

As in her previous Solo Exhibition *so fragile a thing*, Lempert also explores moments of vulnerability, to which the night sceneries add a further layer: It is the nighty scenery that gives the naked boy standing cuddled up to his cat this special frailty and that creates an even dream-like atmosphere. Zooming into the famous Renoir painting in this way further

emphasizes this his vulnerability by completely eliminating the distance to the viewer, which is maintained by the spatiality of the scenery in the original, and placing the child unveiled in front of us.

There is a second reference in the title that is crucial for Lempert's works in this exhibition to the set of *Night Pieces and Arias* ("*Nachtstücke und Arien*") by the great German composer Hans Werner Henze, in collaboration with Austrian poet Ingeborg Bachmann. In the first Aria, where a *thunderstorm of roses* is evoked with a *sky lit by thorns* we are introduced to a strong imagery of love, endangerment and death. (And how frighteningly topical the condensation of this threat to human existence is in the second verse through the concrete image of the mushroom cloud!) This is reinforced when, in the second verse, the night is invoked directly ("O more distant night!"), in a way that is reminiscent of Novalis *Odes to the Night* and the Aria concludes with the words "But a leaf that hit us floats on the waves to the mouth of the river after us." We certainly find this thought materialized in some way or other in Lempert's paintings, where the intimacy they investigate seems to result from the confrontation of interpersonal relationships and affections with the fading of the moment, the passing of time, the foreshadowing of death, and an attempt is made to keep some traces throughout.

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