

Troubled at his saying. Cécile Lempert at IAH Seoul

Troubled at his saying is Mary of Nazareth, according to the biblical story, when the archangel Gabriel announces to her that she, who *does not know a man*, will conceive is expecting a child. This scene, just a few lines in length, is at the core of the Christian, and in particular the catholic, ideal of femininity, combining *virginity* and *motherhood* in the single figure of Mary, the mother of God. As such, it has shaped our view on gender roles and, thus, the power dynamics in our societies, up to the present.

In her second solo exhibition at IAH Gallery, Cécile Lempert presents a new body of works built around the topos of the annunciation. She engages with this topic from a contemporary, feminist perspective against the backdrop of the conservative backlash we are witnessing in liberal democracies around the world and that threaten ideals of gender equality and self-determination of women.¹

There are two central references from German art of the late 19th and 20th century: Otto Dix's (1891-1969) paintings of the Annunciation (1950)² and Otilie Reylaender's (1882-1965) girl nude *Beta naked* (1899)³. In Dix's painting we see a young girl, sitting stiffly on a high chair, who is obviously quite uncomfortable as the angel approaches her. We see a girl that is not given any choice. Her eyes are wide open as she leans away in her chair, her shoulders raised, her fingers cramped, staring at the angel who is depicted here as one with the Holy Ghost in form of a dove, approaching her from the upper right corner. Her mouth is deep red, like a wound, her lips seem swollen. Dressed in girl's clothing from the mid-twentieth century, we see her as a contemporary. It is a powerful depiction of importunity, the crossing of boundaries and the intrusion in one's autonomy, presented in the context of a core scene of Christian faith. Reylaender's painting, *Beta naked*, shows an even younger girl, sitting on a stool, her hands cramped on the armrests, staring at the observer with an expression of unease, even fear, as she is fully exposed to their gaze. Looking at her, in this exposed setting, makes the observer complicit in this intrusionary act.

¹ Cf.: Edith M. Lederer: "Women's rights are under attack 30 years after leaders adopted a blueprint for equality, UN says", in: AP News, March 6, 2025, <https://apnews.com/article/un-women-girls-equality-beijing-conference-rights-b009715ff605ccf47f1b72865c7a27e7>.

² Cf.: Frédérique Goerig-Hergott et al.: *Otto Dix - Isenheimer Altar*. Stuttgart 2016.

³ Cf.: Susanna Böhme-Netzel: *Otilie Reylaender 1882 - 1965. Unterwegs*. Worpswede 2015.

Lempert, now, brings these two works together, taking Raeylaender's composition and putting it in the context of a depiction of the Annunciation. She makes the original girl's nude a self-portrait, depicting herself as a child, with a lowered face, cast into shadows, with nothing on her body but a barrette in her hair. This even strengthens the impression of the exposure of her body, as the face is the only part of it that is not well-lit from all sides. This central piece of the exhibition, *Annunciation / Beta Naked*, is combined with a painting presenting Lempert's version of the second core component of the classic Annunciation scene: the approaching archangel Gabriel. Rather than a glorious, imposing, or threatening figure, however, the angel in *Annunciation / The Angel* is a young boy, not any older than the girl in the first painting. He seems to approach her fleet-footedly, half dancing, half wading through mellow green, with a purple cloth falling down his shoulders. His gaze is lowered as if turned inside, perhaps even trance-like. This opposition of the girl and the boyish angel softens the initial shock of the scene, deviating from its expected continuation and thus yielding more ambivalence in its contemplation on the limits of agency and autonomy in childhood. Just like in Dix's and Reylaender's paintings, the children in Lempert's paintings, while instantiating the iconographic motif of the Annunciation, are presented as individual persons rather than as merely abstract, allegoric figures.⁴

Vis-à-vis the angel we see a third painting within this central group of works: In *Benigna* we see a man with an edgy, shady face and dark hair, bending down above the rigid figure of a woman, inspecting her from so close that it becomes physically uncomfortable to see. The homogeneous beige complexion, the torpid posture and the medieval apparel, combined with the title of the painting that alludes to Saint Benigna, we get a clearer understanding of the scene we are observing: It is a man looking at the wooden statue of St. Benigna (in Czech: Sv. Dobrotivá; Prague, early 14th century), exhibited presently at the convent of Saint Agnes in Prague.⁵ St Benigna was killed at the gates of Cologne with St Ursula and her 11,000 virgins. Allegedly, her body was then carried to the monastery of the Annunciation in Zaječov. In the painting, however, and without this background knowledge we cannot be sure whether we are looking at a real woman, paralysed, perhaps, or sleeping, or a statue. The role of the man is

⁴ Cf. Hettie Judah: „*Girls observed: the art of taking young women seriously*”, in: Apollo Magazine, 02/2023.

⁵ Cf. Štěpánka Chlumská (Ed.): *Die mittelalterliche Kunst in Böhmen und Mitteleuropa, 1230–1530*. Prague 2006.

not any clearer, as you he might seem threatening or caring, the gaze might express furious desire, an artistic interest, or scientific analysis. Consequently, we might think either of *Sleeping Beauty* or *Snow White*,⁶ in their artificial sleep brought about by black magic, or of Pygmalion from Ovid's *Metamorphosis*⁷, giving life to his statue and falling in love with it. Or, we might ask, is it a man approaching a dead body, checking for signs of life? In any case, it is the contrast of a passive figure in stupor, and an actively approaching, intruding figure that connects this painting with Lempert's *Annunciation*.

To the left, we have a group of three works, with the large-scale split-screen painting *Come upon thee* in the centre. This signature piece of Lempert's shows an extreme close-up of her own face on a huge canvas, with a slight shift between the left and the right side, breaking the symmetry of the composition and causing a disquietude. The colour application is rather thin in this painting, giving it a translucent appearance. The red-shift in colours makes it glow. This accentuates her bloody eyes that stare right at the observer – frightened, overwhelmed (or is it prurient?) – making it hard to withstand its intensity. We are reminded of the Dix painting again, where we face a quite similar expression in Mary's eyes – or should we call her *Urte*, as clearly we look at a real girl, a contemporary, just like in Reylaender's depiction of *Beta*. The title, again, alludes to the biblical story of the annunciation (Luke 1,35; KJB): “And the angel answered and said unto her, The Holy Ghost shall come upon thee, and the power of the Highest shall overshadow thee”. These words, when heard with fresh ears, sound rather threatening indeed: There is no resisting against the power of the Highest. The Angel does not ask for consent. Mary, he announces, will be overshadowed by God's power, He will *come upon her*, as she has been chosen (not: *has* chosen) to give birth to the son of God. And while Mary, finally, obediently gives in, it is no wonder that we find, throughout the history of art, very intense, emotionally ambiguous depictions of this scene, that do not conceal her overburdening, her initial resistance before falling into allegiance, and thus show the Annunciation as an *imposition*: Thus, Dix was strong influenced by Matthias Grünewald's (c. 1480-1525) *Isenheim Altarpiece* (c. 1512-1516)⁸ and this portrait of a hesitant Mary on the

⁶ Heinz Rölleke (Ed.): *Grimms Märchen. Text und Kommentar. Vollständige Ausgabe auf der Grundlage der dritten Auflage (1837)*. Berlin 2007, KHM 50; 53.

⁷ R. J. Tarrant (Ed.): *P. Ovidi Nasonis Metamorphoses*. Oxford 2004, X. 243-297.

⁸ Cf. Hans Jürgen Rieckenberg: *Matthias Grünewald*. Herrsching 1976.

left wing of the altar's second view. Lempert's work stands in their tradition. These days, however, it must also be looked at as a decisively *contemporary* perspective: The exhibition is inevitably set in the context of our current debates about gender roles, sexual morals, and the reproductive ethics. It is, in its reduction in terms of both form and content, an intense critique of how the sexualisation of teenagers and even children gets normalized, how girls are still forced in roles formed by questionable ideals of virginity and motherhood and get socially punished for dissent, where right-wing Christian movements try to roll back women's rights and visibility in the political sphere, questioning not just the right of sexual and reproductive health-care and the primacy of one's own choice concerning one's body, but partly even question their right to vote, their right to divorce, and their aptness for public office. This might be most visible in the United States, where we can watch a conservative, partly Christo-fascist takeover in unprecedented speed.⁹ But when looking closer, the pattern repeats around the world: Wherever a conservative backlash looms, women's rights soon become a central battleground.

Left and right of *Come upon thee*, we see two triptychs: *Naked Child on a Chair* and *Naked Child on Sheets*. The traditional form of a triptych, particularly in this context, clearly alludes to the history of sacral art and to altarpieces in particular. Yet, Lempert does not use her multipanel works for *narrative* purposes, as in a temporal sequence of different scenes, but for *analytic* purposes to single out details in a *synchronic* sequence. Both triptychs dissect a child's nude into three segments. The first one takes on Reylaender's *Beta naked*, as adapted by Lempert in her *Annunciation / Beta Naked*. The second one shows a different child, lying rather than sitting. Apart from that, it is mimicking Beta's pose, and the segments are chosen in perfect accordance with the first triptych. Yet, while the girl on the chair, taken up from *Annunciation / Beta Naked*, is obviously highly uncomfortable, involuntarily exposed and, thus, violated in her private sphere, the second child looks comparatively unharmed, secure

⁹ Cf.: Peter Smith: "Trump energizes conservative Christians with religious policies and assaults on cultural targets", in: PBS News, August 7, 2025, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/politics/trump-energizes-conservative-christians-with-religious-policies-and-assaults-on-cultural-targets>.

Emma Cordover: "Are Christian nationalists targeting women's right to vote?", in: Politico, August 15, 2025, <https://www.politico.com/newsletters/women-rule/2025/08/15/christian-nationalists-target-womens-right-to-vote-00511090>.

Adam Gabbatt: "Trump has put Christian nationalists in key roles – say a prayer for free speech", in: The Guardian, April 16, 2025, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2025/apr/16/christian-nationalists-trump-administration>.

Kate Zernike: "Texas Supreme Court Rejects Challenge on Exceptions to Abortion Ban", in: The New York Times, May 31, 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/05/31/us/texas-abortion-ban-supreme-court.html>.

and relaxed. Their body does not have the same cramped tension, the shoulders are not raised in a defensive stance, and, crucially, the lap is not exposed but lightly covered by sheets. These slight shifts in composition exemplify how seemingly insignificant details can significantly alter the overall picture of a scene and turn a violent gaze into a tender one.

The final group of works, consisting of two more split-screen paintings, brings the exhibition to a close: *Behold the Handmaid* once more picks up the main topic of the annunciation. In one more self-portrait, repeated in two panels on the same canvas, we see a rather different portrayal of a young woman, approached by the observer. She turns her face down, avoiding eye-contact. A strand of hair hangs down over her face, dissolving as in a trace of tears. And yet, there is some calmness in this painting, some kind of silent acceptance, or so it seems to me against the backdrop of the quoted passage from the biblical tale, where Mary stops questioning the Angel's words and gives into her fate (Luke 1,38; KJB): "And Mary said, Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word. And the angel departed from her." We find this painting in the proximity of *Child with a Dog*, another children's nude. Notably, however, the naked boy, lying on the floor next to a black dog, gently nestled against him, is the only person in the exhibition that seems unambiguously comfortable, relaxed, unharmed. It is also the only scene where the observer does not seem to partake. The boy, one suspects, is alone with his dog. There's not intruder here. He is in familiar company, has a confidential counterpart, unlike any of the other persons we encounter in the exhibition. It is this counterpoint that Lempert puts the end of the exhibition.

Jasper Lohmar