

## **Cécile Lempert – In lowly garb**

With “In lowly garb”, Cécile Lempert presents a new body of works at Castle Gallery, L.A., in what is her first solo exhibition in the United States. The title of the exhibition is taken from a Protestant Advent hymn based on a poem by German poet Friedrich Rückert, which begins with the lines: “Your King comes in lowly garb,/He is carried by the burdened foal,/ Receive Him joyfully, Jerusalem!” These lines capture a central topic of the exhibited paintings, in which Cécile Lempert engages with ambiguities of her family’s religious and cultural background and its ideological impact on both her present personal life and the broader society.

In the center of the exhibition we find two close-up portraits of my great-grandfather, Paul Horn, a grammar school teacher and deeply pious Lutheran, whose world view was shaped by Kantian ethics of duty and who, as a traumatized participant in the First World War, for which he had initially volunteered enthusiastically but from which he soon returned wounded, struggled throughout his life to make sense of the deaths of the fallen, as is documented in several publications – speeches, essays, and memoirs of the war – from the 1920s and 1930s. We can look at these paintings as an attempt to capture in an analytic, yet compassionate way the stance of a man shaped by his Lutheran and Kantian heritage and the concomitant morals of modesty, obedience, sense of duty, and readiness to make sacrifices who uses it as an ideological point of reference and source of justification for (Christian) nationalism, war apologetics, and authoritarianism, like many of his generation have done.

In the two portraits of Paul Horn, entitled *Vogelschießen 1934 (Popinjay 1934)* and *Advent 1936*, highlighting the historic, documentary character by their precise sparseness, we face a middle-aged man with a rigid and stern, indeed authoritarian and perhaps even threatening face, who on the one hand draws attention to himself, but on the other seems to have moved out of the scene. In the first painting, he is sitting upright in a beer garden, with the cane he needed because of his war injury, opposite his daughter, who is pushed to the edge of the picture and into the background.

This also results in a portrait of a father-daughter relationship, which in this picture is characterized by the absence of any communication: Her gaze is lowered, he sits turned away with his hands clasped and his mouth pinched shut. It is the second panel of the diptych that restores a certain softness to the scene and gives the man a gentler, more human touch: here

Lempert draws on a photograph by Edward Steichen from 1904, in which a park landscape with blossoming chestnut trees can be seen with the aesthetics of early photography. This mild, tranquil scene opens up, as it were, as a space of thought before the gaze of the man on the right-hand panel, who barely seems to notice the folk festival scene surrounding him – and as we look at Horn through many decades, the Steichen photography is a document of time passed relative to Horn himself, leading back 30 years to the pre-war years.

The diptych echoes themes from the history of ideas that we regularly encounter in Paul Horn's texts and speeches, two of which are included in the exhibition in translation: there we find the ideal of Protestant restraint and modesty, and the Kantian conviction that a deed's worth depends solely on the maxim that underlies it and in no way on its actual consequences in the world. This thought motivates a certain contempt for the world, which we can recognize in Lempert's painting in his facial features, as we see his ideal of Luther's "giant defiance". It is, and this ominous component speaks with all its gravity from the painting, at the same time this cosmos of thought that brought with it or was misused for a destructive image of masculinity and idealized Germanness in Paul Horn and so many others of his generation.

In the second major painting showing Paul Horn, *Advent 1936*, we see him sitting at a table set for Advent with the same serious, stern expression on his face. His gaze is fixed on a lit Advent wreath. Once again, his daughter is sitting at the table with him; once again, she has moved out of his field of vision into the background and to the edge of the canvas. While his face is clearly outlined, her features are blurred and only a gentle smile is visible. Using her characteristic split screen technique, Lempert uses the second panel of the diptych to focus on a different part of the photograph: the bourgeois scene with the fine, yet modest, table setting, the Christmas stollen and regalia such as the chain of his pocket watch. The depicted father-daughter pair and the intimate scene with its cultural significance are thereby subjected to an almost microscopic examination. The additional, external context of the scenery is deliberately delegated to the titles and accompanying texts, in order for her paintings to concentrate on seemingly minor details and gaining historic and psychological significance from them. This eye for alleged marginalia brings back to mind the title of the exhibition: the significance of the scenery appears, through its reduction, "in lowly garb".

In the early years of Hitler's reign of injustice, years before the Second World War, Paul Horn argues that what is required from us modern people is a dying off of everything of *this* world, awaiting a world beyond – the recognition that we are “in this world only dust”, and that this very recognition is a prerequisite if we want “that life be more than vegetating”. We are only truly free if we understand ourselves as being seized by the invisible God himself in obedient passivity. If, on the other hand, we see ourselves merely as part of a visible world that we control and shape according to our needs, we make ourselves dependent on the world and degrade ourselves to a mere machine. Here, Horn seeks the image of a choice between “the trough and the altar” that we are faced with when we look at “the table we need to live”. We can, with this background-knowledge, find traces of this mind-set in the face of a man who is clearly traumatized, who confronts himself and his surrounding with hardly fulfillable moral demands, who struggles with his faith and the justification of his early enthusiasm for war, and who always looks isolated, lonely, lost in thought.

According to Horn, the First World War brought the above ‘insights’ into sharp relief: in his “Christmas memories from the battlefield” he describes, with the pathos typical of him and his cultural environment, as an awakening experience, how the stars appeared to him as Christmas lights during this time of extreme hardship, after weeks of living in the mud of the trenches next to the corpses of dead soldiers. These experiences form the background to his alleged insight of a necessity of some “dying off” of everything worldly within us to feel “completely seized by the Invisible” – and it is this “insight” that motivates a sketchy, yet clear enough and devastating political turn: the suggestion that there is a need for a leader in obedience to God, who leads the German youth into the world without betraying them *to* the world. The Christmas scene we witness in Lempert's painting attempts to capture some of this cultural, historic, and psychological complexity.

The full extent of the disastrous consequences of this cultural and religious education and what he and his intellectual surrounding made of it becomes clear here when past wars of conquest are justified with reference to some concept of duty and sacrifice, and a justification for future wars is at least prepared: he paints the picture of the German people that cowered like a dog under the whip due to the Treaty of Versailles and puts Hindenburg and Hitler in a historical line with Luther, expressing the hope that they might lead to a truly modern people with a new religiousness and a return to morality in the sense of Kant.

We face, then, an intellectual who participated actively in the cultural life of the interwar period and who eloquently defended a specific version of Christian Nationalism. Acknowledging all the apparent differences to the present discourse, it is no coincidence that Lempert explores these topics in a time in which we face the dangers of a novel type of Christo-fascism. Interestingly, though, her paintings are more a quest for traces and critical questioning of a personal but widely shared cultural heritage than an indictment of some alien other considered from a distance.

*Advent 1936 / Barbara* brings a shift of focus, with the girl from the corner in the large diptych now taking center stage in a smaller, more intimate painting: the dominating father figure is not visible in this picture. Instead, we focus entirely on the girl's face and the Advent wreath with four candles lit, corresponding with the 'candles' of the chestnut flowers on the opposite wall. Naturally, one thinks of the title of the exhibition again, being an Advent hymn fitting perfectly in this scene – and within the context of the exhibition, the Protestant rejection of all violence that it expresses, at odds with any attempt to use Lutheran beliefs to justify militarism, is most significant: “O mighty ruler without an army,/ powerful warrior without a spear,/ O Prince of Peace with great might!/ The lords of the earth do seek/ to bar the way to thy throne,/ but thou will win it without battle.” It is a comforting, hopeful scene we witness, gained by refocusing, the highlighting of details, and the usage of blank spaces: absences of surroundings shape our perceptions just like perceived objects themselves do.

Lempert juxtaposes these images with the painting *Wallraf-Richartz-Museum 2023*, a split-screen portrait of me looking closely at an altarpiece by German Gothic painter Stefan Lochner. The vastly larger-than-life portrait in full profile contrasts with the above-mentioned portraits in its intense colours: the glowing dark red of the background brings a distance between this painting and the dissections of black-and-white photographs from the thirties. With the portrayed man facing in the direction of *Advent 1936*, where we see my grandmother and great-grandfather, we get a transgenerational interplay of looks and gestures beyond the limitations of the individual paintings. The gesture of looking at a painting in a museum, as captured in *Wallraf-Richartz-Museum 2023*, might suggest a somewhat analytic, historicizing, even distanced stance of the portrayed man. Yet, he is depicted with such tenderness, attentiveness, and warmth that this does not seem to capture the situation fully. The religious context, provided by the altar piece, also leads back to the topics covered in the other

paintings. It is, thus, a complex relationship between a young man from the present and a formative family background with a lasting cultural impact from 90 years ago that Lempert hints at. She leaves us with questions about what stance to take towards one's family background, how to deal with the knowledge of the deeply problematic aspects of this cultural heritage, and how our present culture and the newly rising fascism are influenced by the discussed ideology.

This contrastive treatment of photographs from 1904 to 2023 leads to a second central topic of the exhibition that picks up a strand of Lempert's earlier work: the investigation of the photographic medium leads to an exploration of our experience of time, simultaneity, and transience. In a strange way, scenes from the distant past get a present life through the transformation of a photograph in a painting that shows the same soft brushstrokes as the paintings that show contemporary scenes. The other way around, the contemporary scenes get historicized through this contrastive hanging. The effect, at least on me, is the impression of an oscillation between closeness and distance.

This negotiation of questions of time and transience seems to be the key to the final major work of the exhibition: *Lupinen*, a large-scale triptych depicting a field of lupine flowers, greatly enlarged and abstracted, with shifts between the three panels that show repeated patterns without falling in any clear geometric relations. The alienated dark and glowing colours of early colour films that Lempert transfers to the canvas picks up the red background of *Wallraf-Richartz-Museum 2023*. The sea of flowers may be reminiscent of waves, of flesh, of flames: Here the candles of the chestnut blossom and the Advent wreath reappear – this time in all colourful intensity, made the sole theme and taken to an extreme.

Two associations come to mind when I look at these canvases, which, like time itself, pass over the viewer: First, I think of verses from Bob Dylan's *Every Grain of Sand*, that touch on some of the very same topics as *In lowly garb* does and provides an image for these topics that somehow corresponds to *Lupinen*. He sings: "I hear the ancient footsteps like the motion of the sea/Sometimes I turn, there's someone there, other times it's only me". Where the fields of lupine flowers mirror the *motion of the sea* we seem to hear those ancient footsteps through them. And the other pictures of the exhibition seem to deal with the very thought of turning around and finding someone there or, sometimes, being thrown back to oneself through this looking back. Now, Dylan's song ends with the consoling thought, also present in the

religious beliefs on which Lempert focuses, that one hangs in the balance of God's plan "like every sparrow falling, like every grain of sand."

The second association that comes to my mind facing *Lupinen* is the final scene of Heinrich von Kleist's play *The Prince of Homburg*, a play that was very popular in Nazi Germany. In his speech on *Modern Mankind and Religion*, Paul Horn explains that in this play, "the prince is sentenced to death by the court martial [for leading an offensive against explicit orders – even though it leads to victory]; he does not comply with the sentence - so the Great Elector tears up the sentence - he makes the prince stand on his own, and now he is forced out of himself, his humanity, his love of country, his own insight, to acknowledge the sentence from within himself." Horn takes this to exemplify the Kantian claim – which he transfers to Lutheran theology – that the recognition of our dependence on God, like the moral law, is not to be expected to be forced on us from the outside world but has to be won from within us. Now, of course this is only one side of the story of the *Prince of Homburg* – leftists, like the German composer Hans-Werner Henze, who wrote an opera on Ingeborg Bachmann's adaptation of the play, focus on the other side which is clearly present: a *criticism* of this Kantian beliefs that Horn highlights when he refers to the play. Kleist portrays the protagonist's fear of death in full detail, with all his unheroic sentiments (which, incidentally, earned him the contempt of Bismarck). He lets the Great Elector's niece question his Kantian ideals of duty and justice and presents a contrasting ideal of compassion and forgiveness – and in the end, remember, the prince *is* pardoned. Now, the play ends in an intriguingly ambiguous scene where the prince gets wreathed and elevated in the Great Elector's garden, surrounded by gillyflowers and carnation, leading to his question whether everything has been a dream, and to the answer "A dream, what else?" – it is this scene and, of course, the complicated dialectical situation of the play's reception, that I think of when looking at *Lupinen*, that carry so much weight in terms of content due to the exhibition context, despite the extreme reduction of the object depicted (as in *lowly garb?*), for isn't it a dream-like state we find ourselves in, facing this scenery?

Ironically, this passage is not the end of the play – there are two more verses that lead us back to the more distressing topics of the exhibition: how the Kantian-Lutheran heritage can get abused for motivating (Christian) nationalism, for justifying war, and for attacking democratic and progressive ideals. After several officers have called to the field, to battle, and victory,

they all shout together: “In dust with all the enemies of Brandenburg!” A heritage not light to bear.

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