

## **The Fate of Inward Waiting in Nadine Rennert's Sculptural Figures**

Eugen Blume, 2008

The modern public has, in the meantime, become used to the massive presence of contemporary art. People stroll through the galleries, museums, as well as visit mega events and are confronted with such a profusion of artworks that the question almost automatically arises, whether it is possible to endure so much art at all or what is actually seen?

Approaching art is, as we know, not only pleasurable but also a science, therefore complicated, and requires especially time. Fundamentally, a day does not afford sufficient time to observe a single work seriously. Approaching art can be quite an elaborate process, proportionately so in relation to the hermetic scope of the artwork and its complexity. More than ever, today art demands of viewers that they translate what they see in an image into words. The sense of what at first is only maintained to be art can be interpreted only verbally. By verbalization alone a discursive relationship can be established to an object that, at the same time, paradoxically and consciously eludes verbalization.

Understandably, it is not possible to describe Nadine Rennert's work with certainty because it is so recent. A cautious understanding means to consider one's words extremely carefully. At best, a dialogue with the work begins, seeking not just refuge in free association but by faithfully confining its focus on what the work itself emanates. Already venturing to name the creations that the artist has formed of various materials poses the problem of finding the right terms.

We are sitting at a table in the museum café and peruse the illustrations for this catalogue. The artist relates several details, answers questions on the techniques and the materials used; from time to time I hear words that sound intriguing. Above all she has a very friendly laugh. Admittedly her laugh gives me a boost, as her figurations have something uncanny about them, which of course is by no means unusual. To a great extent the uncanny is an essential characteristic of recent international contemporary art. A tendency toward the uncanny or a preoccupation with the unfathomable abyss of the soul is currently clearly detectable. It is as if art production now has lost confidence in psychoanalysis and its further development since Sigmund Freud, as if the artists were tumbling again into those depths explored in literature by such authors as Arthur Schnitzler, Franz Kafka and others in consanguinity to Freud. Or as if they were searching for those Romantic, mysterious regions of psychological portraits painted so superbly – before psychoanalysis was discovered – by the Grimm brothers'

compilation of German folk-tales, by E.T.A. Hoffmann, Edgar Allan Poe, Louis Stevenson or Ambrose Bierce. Undoubtedly, many of Nadine Rennert's figures could stem from this rich fund of nightmare fantasies. Offhandedly one could assume that she is striving for a continuation of Surrealism, in which artists predominantly capitalized on the emotional traumas resulting from social rejection. The formerly programmatic term is, however, hardly applicable to recent art. It has become a historical term. What actually made the mysterious an attractive genre of art again? What huddles once more on the breast of Henry Fuseli's beautiful maiden in the famous painting of the *Nightmare*, after modernity was convinced that the workings of all these ghouls were conclusively analysed and discarded? Resembling a great apotropaic magic theatre, Hollywood produces one horror film after another and constantly fantasizes over zombies, aliens and other spectres of the dark seeking to destroy the world within cinema. Horror and the uncanny have evolved into a dominant element of our entertainment and pastime within computer games, comics and trivial literature, such as *Harry Potter*, and in world literature, Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*. These all build on the fear of the unfathomable and they all present substitute worlds attracting us on account of our dissatisfaction with the present. An American horror-film director could not contain his enthusiasm for the death machines and gruesome diversity represented in his murder scenes in an interview printed in a glossy magazine; he asserted that this brought an otherwise lacking excitement into the lives of the audience. Art cannot compete with this animated, crazy world. It is preoccupied in a different terrain and, above all, cannot ignore the laws of its own static poetry. Nadine Rennert's sculptural figures are very probably motivated by the dark world of film and literature – some reveal this very obviously, such as the white larva in the work *Even the Exceptional must have Limits*, which consciously brings Gregor Samsa's mysterious *Metamorphosis* in Franz Kafka's narrative to mind. The figures are made of fabric or related materials. What term could be more aptly applied to them than the word "puppet", which is related to the word pupil and is thus also concerned with the faculty of sight. Pupil in fact is derived from the Latin word "pupilla", which denotes a girl not yet come of age, and has to do with the word "puppet" insofar as one sees one's own mirror image in the eyes of the person standing opposite. In the context of Nadine Rennert's work this has a certain poetic significance. Puppets and dolls are an integral part of early magic-charm inventories. They are, as human and animal revenants, the enigmatic guests of dark interiors. The fear of their coming to life and their potential to work evil upon us testifies even today to the remnants of a once unbroken magical relation to the world deeply ingrained within us. Because they are "sewn by hand", human figures formed of fabric are more mystifying than figures created of

wax-like substances whose surfaces can be made to closely resemble skin – such as the famous figures in Madame Tussaud's wax museum. For the creation of the former only a needle and thread, at most a sewing machine, are needed. The option of being able to make them is like having a democratic right to perform magic. The reason behind the Surrealists having taken up the sewing machine in their inventory is manifest. Every kind of voodoo magic can be performed using a simple doll sewn by hand. In art history, Oskar Kokoschka's failed attempts to have his lost love recreated with the needle and thread are known to us. What hopes could he have cherished by attempting such an absurd venture? Innumerable stories about awakening puppets and dolls to life exist. The puppet is counted among the archetypes of the unconscious associated with anxiety as classified by C. G. Jung. All of this may find an echo in a figure confronting us without a head; in seeming compensation it has, protruding from a black leather dress, three legs on which it, at least, tries to stand. The artist has seemingly depicted a female figure – indeed, its gender is rather mutable – which, with its three legs and naked feet, is modelled very close to life and therefore particularly provoking for the viewer. Because the material is plainly recognizable, the intellect easily comprehends the visible illusion of the artist's naturalism. But even so, the artwork arouses deep-seated irrational emotions and awakens the feeling of the preternatural manifest in the figure. Beyond this simple psychological lesson we especially learn something of art. Even if it is described as being naturalistic, it is never the attempt to imitate reality; art never actually creates something that, in the biological sense, comes to life. In any case it is a translation that pursues an intellectual goal. Produced and conceived by the artist, art is a transformation striving to represent the very moment of intellect sparked off by some specific agent. We could take the case of Nadine Rennert finding a black dress with a zipper attached to the collar, where it turns out that the zipper can be fastened so completely it would seem the seamstress had forgotten her customer's head. This strange discovery seems worthy of a figure that, although without a head, possesses three legs (*Obscured*). The “normal” person with some fantasy, however, may succeed in conceiving a figure without a head, but finds the addition of three legs a nonsensical puzzle. It is difficult to put into words what sense the viewer's imagination makes of this absurd extension of a discovered dress. Yet it is precisely this senseless translation or this fanciful image that touch upon something apparently not part and parcel of daily life. It is only through the eyes of the artist that we experience the fallaciousness of this view. Indeed, if the poetry of this transgression is allowed to take effect on the viewers, they then soon grow sensitive to the irrational in their accustomed surroundings.

How can a counterweight for dust be created? This question – which every orderly person with a dust-cloth would try to answer – first acquires its meaning by the figure in the artwork bearing the title *Dust and its Counterweight*: it is seated on a three-legged stool with its head thrust downward into a cardboard box and painstakingly endeavours to hold its balance in this pose. The invisible head in the ordinary cardboard box inevitably evokes the impression of looking within; the figure obviously seeks within itself the solution to the problem. Again the viewers are confronted with a headless human figure. Again they learn that, paradoxically, headlessness does not stand for the loss of head, but rather reinforces its presence by underlining this part of the body as the home of the intellect. We find the counter-image displayed in *Clever Elsie*, stemming from the tale of the same name recorded by the Grimm brothers; it is the story of a foolish girl who loses her identity. After waking under the cover of a fowler's net with little bells, which her husband threw over her whilst she slept, Elsie asks herself "Is it I, or is it not I?" Because she does not know the answer to her question, she then goes home to her husband, Hans, in order to ask him. "Hans, is Elsie within?" 'Yes', answered Hans, 'she is within'. Nadine Rennert's figure comprises only the head of Elsie's aimless flight out of the village, veiled in the net of bells. The philosophical reflection on the subject, whose disappearance is prevalent in postmodern times, found a clever beginning in this tale and was continued by the poet Arthur Rimbaud with the now fashionable statement "I is another". If we touch upon this unsolved question of being, then the bells that the instructors of pick pockets have sewn onto the training dummies ring.

The head in the cardboard box and the dust, the smallest form of matter still visible to the naked eye, symbolize the balance of thought, perception and feeling. Nadine Rennert's sculptural figures all search in some way for the balance, the stability, the harmony that are shattered time and again, starting in fright at our own ineptitude. It seems to be the fate of humankind to be damned to an *Escape on the Spot*. The figure with the same name has its head veiled in black lace, referring to the inner traumatic world of thought that gives birth to these dark dreams: it bears seven seemingly moving legs that are incapable of moving forwards, forcing the viewer to look on in pain. Encased in white lace, the legs capture the gruesome dilemma of an agonizing attempt to flee; as we know, it is an archetypal dream image. The Grimm brothers' tale of the *Girl without Hands* likewise confronts the reader with the deeply implanted fear of relationships, patterns of dependence and irrational violence. Nadine Rennert transforms the wounds left by the cut-off hands into rose arm stubs, in the cliché of a banal greeting card message that has no healing power.

Wearing gloves with lucent fingertips, two empty black coats, prostrate on the floor and facing one another, are strikingly ominous. The artist has given this work the title of *Inward Waiting*. The title betrays the poetical sense of these two figures who otherwise arouse the suspicion of being created as banal horror effects. The anthropomorphic dread we feel toward empty clothing was previously unmasked by René Magritte in the *Therapist* or *Philosophy in the Boudoir*. Also the fantasy film implements the motif of empty clothes as a death metaphor. It is ubiquitous in Romantic literature. The empty frames left over by those hollowed-out beings have nothing to wait for, having already squandered everything. The empty mask is their counterpart. In his adaptation of Arthur Schnitzler's *Traumnovelle* (*Dream Story*), Stanley Kubrick utilizes the empty guise and perverse masquerade for the tribunal that decides the fate of the perplexed main character. With a pompous round-dance of naked bodies and veiled representatives, vacuous society crowds around the victim of their sexual fantasies.

A sarcastic assemblage of jogging pants and a mythological costume, *Nereid's Trousers* tempts the viewer yet again to flee the quotidian in daydreams, to take on a hybrid form that still feels a native affinity – albeit as a halved grotesque – with the primordial element of water. Formerly virtuosically painted by Arnold Böcklin in large-scale scenery for the enjoyment of the middle class, the Nereids, Tritons and Naiades have now lost their human halves. The entwined serpentine abdomen is pure emptiness and its mythological potency, dreamt of by sea-gods, is extinguished.

All of Nadine Rennert's figures seem to be overcome by inward waiting, although only two of her sculptures bear this title. The half-length figure of a female bust with the simple name of *Girl with Fur* is executed of beige-coloured suede and set on a glass base. It serves as a fitting example of a figure waiting to be transformed into an animal, as the already advancing growth of fur along its arms seems to suggest. The rough, leathery skin, like an animal pelt turned inside-out, seems to be taken by surprise with the covering of dense fur just like the famous *Fur Teacup* by Meret Oppenheim. One could comprehend the fur as a metaphor for inward waiting or, to be more precise, to feel it in an uncanny way. The artist also illustrated this emotional state using her own person as an object. Dressed in dark colours with lights marking her outline, she lay in the shadows under bridges in order to experience an existence without means and the comforts of life, waiting inwards, cherishing alone the hope that things will get better. Again in this case the daring exploit of being another is a metaphor, temporarily playing a role that signals hope to others: I is always another or can always become another.

