

Oceans

A conversation between Meike Behm and Kim Nekarda

Meike Behm: In many of the paintings on view in your exhibition at the Kunsthalle Lingen we see human bodies – relatively clear pictorial elements – in the process of dissolving. Why did you choose the title von einem Rätsel zum andern [from one puzzle to another]. How do these two things fit together?

Kim Nekarda: If you regard the body imprints first and foremost as motifs they do, in fact, show dissolving bodies or, alternatively, incomplete bodies that have yet to manifest themselves. By contrast, if you regard them as the trace or outcome of a process, that is, as more or less controlled results of a particular action, you'll notice less the incompleteness of their appearance and more the complete presence that's specific to the imprint – a presence that is inscribed in the moment of contact, when the object and the image of the object merge. It's a presence, however, that dispenses with recognisability and readability. Whether the contact of real object and canvas brings about auratic elevation or, alternatively, the serial nature, the repeatability, which is inherent in every printing process, means a loss of uniqueness – this is a question that ultimately cannot be clarified. It's thus mostly the other motifs and the photographs of them, which I use as models, that can clearly be understood in terms of conventional depiction. These, of course, primarily come from regions that do not simply reveal themselves to us but rather still need to be comprehended in the first place. Both in my painting and in my motif-universe there are untravelled places I'd like to go: from one puzzle to another.

Looking at your current paintings one notices that they're situated between representation and abstraction. It is also striking that the comic motifs seen in your earlier works are now gone. What brought about these changes?

From the outset my aim was to reference something located outside the picture plane. I culled the comic elements from one particular area, cut them out, and integrated them into my work precisely because I wanted to assimilate this larger context of narrative or story through a “pars pro toto” approach. The same idea is what later led me to the body imprints. They, too, allude to something outside the canvas, reference a present absence. But there was a shift: from the co-optation of specific stories to a concentration on basic elements. In this case the trace of the human body. The new paintings are also evolving; they involve a questioning of the elements that constitute painting: paint and canvas. All this, however, is by no means, a clear line of development from object to abstraction, but rather an extending of my own language and an expanding of possible combinations.

The body imprints come from your own body. So, in this regard, is the artist himself always present in the painting?

There are two aspects here. On the one hand, my body simply is material that I can access whenever I want to picture the imprint of a human body. On the other hand I also need the physical experience of making an imprint in order to establish contact and involve myself with a theme. This both highly intimate and completely abstract moment of touching, exchanging, and inscribing has become the basis of my work, literally, and therefore it’s only logical that it has to be my own body – because it turns out that it’s not just the outcome but also the experience of the process that’s crucial. I want the imprint of the artist to be seen not as a signature but more as a trace.

You create a dialogue between the imprints and what are sometimes tender images of various marine animals. How did you arrive at this approach?

The sea fascinates me. I have read a great deal about it: myths, adventure stories, travelogues, accounts of expeditions, journals of shipwrecked people, research reports on flora and fauna, as well as documentations of deep-sea dives. It was actually while reading about the deep sea that I happened upon a very interesting subject: the hydrothermal vents that are found at depths of 1,000 to 2,500 meters.

These appear along cracks of the earth's crust and are caused by seawater that seeps in, is heated in the earth's interior, enriched with minerals, and is then squeezed out again. In the ice-cold water of the deep sea, and under the enormous pressure of the water column, the minerals precipitate out and black or white chimney-like structures form on the sea floor around which new habitats grow. These are populated by tube worms, for example, which practice chemosynthesis in symbiosis with sulphur bacteria. Situated far from sun and light, these habitats are not only seen as oases of biodiversity but are also considered to be the oldest habitats on this planet. Where conditions make it impossible for us to gain an impression of this world other than the highly distorted one we have, which itself is obtained only with immense technical difficulty. In a lightless place like the deep sea, the light that's needed to take pictures scares off all moving life. What we find at these depths is just a tiny snippet of a habitat of gigantic proportions. More than seventy per cent of the earth is covered with water; eighty per cent of the world's oceans are deeper than 1,000 meters. This means that more than half of the earth's surface can be counted as deep sea. It is the inaccessibility, primal quality, and bizarreness of this universe that excites me – its sheer size, the way its inhabitants have been able to adapt, their survival strategy, elegance, and beauty. I was captivated by all of this and in my work I create a connection between all these motifs and themes and the human body.

So a connection is established between man and animal as living beings and, through this, respect is accorded to the sea and its animals? Is there also an ecological aspect here?

The stapes in the middle ear of humans corresponds to a bone in the upper jaw of sharks and the cranial nerves, too, are amazingly similar. We are descended from fish; we climbed out of the water on to the land, but our bodies, in their make-up, bear traces of this origin to this day, and our blood is, in fact, the fluid that comes closest to seawater in composition. Whether sodium, calcium, bromine, sulphur, or phosphorous – all these substances are found in human blood in a similar combination to that found in the waters of the seas. As to the question of the connection between man and sea,

you could certainly say, with some exaggeration, that the answer circulates inside our bodies, as it's seawater that flows through our veins.

In one of your favourite books, Herman Melville's novel Moby-Dick, the focus is not just on the hunt for a white whale but also on communicating the endlessness of the sea, its enormous size – and the power of the sea in contrast to the power of man, right?

Yes, that's right, and the sheer expanse of the sea and its effect on the human psyche is described with particular beauty and drama in the chapter "The Castaway". Whales were not yet hunted from the mother ship in those days; instead, a handful of seamen were lowered on small whaleboats and they'd row after whales to harpoon them. If they secured a whale with a harpoon, an iron, they'd let out the line. This ran through the catcher boat from bow to stern and back again. It unrolled with a hissing sound and, later, it was gradually hauled in again. All the while the whale could thrash about, or it could dive, and quite often the boat would be dragged along behind on a wild journey. In the chapter I just mentioned, a clumsy seaman falls overboard during a turbulent scene of just this sort, and the other seamen have to decide whether to rush to his aid, letting the whale go, or keep up the pursuit. They decide in favour of their catch and the unfortunate seaman – a very bright boy named Pip, who's actually just a cook on the Pequod – is left behind, all alone on the open ocean, for the ship and all the whaleboats are soon out of sight. Though he is fished out of the sea hours later, it's only his body that's saved: "The sea had jeeringly kept his finite body up, but drowned the infinite of his soul".¹ And from that day he went about the deck a seer gone mad. What befell him during his dip in the sea? With no point of reference to orient him in the gaping void of the ocean, he was left to his own devices and his consciousness got lost in the bottomless depths of the sea as well as in the equally boundless space of his own inner reality. When there are no coordinates, the contours of one's own body, the self, dissolve: the outside flows inside and what's innermost gets lost outside.

- 1 *Herman Melville, Moby-Dick: or, The Whale* (New York, London: Penguin Books, 2001), p. 453.