



Ohne Titel (Untitled),
pencil, photocopy
and gouache on paper,
29.5cm x 20.8cm, 2003

When talking about her paintings, Monika Baer very often speaks about one thing being ‘naturally’ related to another, or about how certain motifs ‘naturally’ develop from earlier ones. Coming from the artist herself, this naturalisation of disparate pictorial elements sounds provocative, especially as nothing seems more opaque to the viewer than the recognition of any obvious or ‘natural’ relationship between the heterogeneous signifiers in her work. Yet the causal relationship she claims between what is nominally considered abstract painting and technically realistic painted or drawn figuration is both astonishing and seductive. In this context, the idea of seduction is achieved by means of a cartographic technique, a form that is always already mediated. What we find recorded is a multi-dimensional terrain of niches, caves, dwellings, bodies, landscapes, quotations from the world of pop, media, the underground and the supernatural. However, for viewers to content themselves with any of these fields does not seem to be the idea. We are always led optically to a different field, a situation almost comparable with Madeleine du Scudéry’s *Carte du Tendre*, which leads us to an imaginary involvement with the work. Sometimes the paths of seduction in Baer’s paintings reveal themselves clearly, swaying between organic and technical networks. Whether canals, tubes, wires, spider webs, floral ornaments, tangled roots or branches, these lanes often lead back to themselves, and always in an enticing yet cool manner. Whatever it is that floats here, its circulation is never linear but happens through diversions and in accordance with displaced desires.

Even though we may know from our understanding of rhetoric that emphatic reinforcements, such as the word ‘naturally’, are likely a fragile form of negation, a risky aspect of Monika Baer’s work does indeed revolve around moments of naturalness. In his essay ‘Smoke gets in your I’, Clemens Krümmel doesn’t pose the question of nature as naturalisation, meaning nature as effect, but instead he states: ‘The speculative element which has been introduced by the confrontation of a fundamental attitude towards abstraction with the insular placement of realism, is obviously trying to reassure itself of some kind of “biological truth” within the paintings, suggesting a nexus of image and body. The pictographic symbol paradoxically becomes flesh once again.’¹

In order to understand the place of narrative in her work, we need to look at the visual conventions Monika Baer uses, and the way she makes it possible for them to be understood as ‘natural’ within the work. Firstly we can observe the masks, faces, windswept hair, caves, forests, lakeshores and blank picture planes as elements that could potentially create an iconography. Secondly, though not completely divorced from the former, we should understand that painting and drawing are capable of organising a visual logic that – apart from the difference of the aesthetic signs (the colours, gestures, strokes and application of paint) – stages the literal equivalence of the signifiers on the picture plane. The icons Baer brings to play in the work are, in the widest sense, realistically rendered in order to suggest representation and readability, whereas their actual painterly form disrupts the semantic pleasure of narrative, even choosing to break the flow in order to pick it up again in another place

Clemens Krümmel,
‘Smoke gets in your
I’, in *Texte zur Kunst*,
no.47, September 2002,
pp.183–86.

Overleaf
Ohne Titel (Untitled),
watercolour, acrylic
and oil on cotton,
180cm x 280cm, 2004

and shape — in traces of drips, watery stains, splashes and milky veils. Here painting is able to do what words can barely describe and grammar hardly organise. It allows layers of perception to appear manifold and discontinuous, and to transform the fairy-tale chronology of ‘once upon a time’ into the ‘here and now’ of a physical site and sense. Thus, even if Monika Baer makes use of the specific craft of painting to a greater degree than many of her contemporaries, her ‘mastery’ of the medium by no means implies that her paintings are not discursive.

The consequent idea of staging in Monika Baer’s paintings corresponds to the non-linear structure of cultural, historical and psychological space-time, as well as to the heterogeneity of the mediated, material, literary and pictorial scenarios of the unconscious. In other words, Monika Baer’s claim to the naturalness of visual relationships must fall back on the sites and techniques of the unconscious. In complete contrast to an understanding of art as a practice that visualises primal human influences for the first time, it is the cultural and historical references that make Baer’s paintings seem dreamlike, symbolist or surreal. Thus, the miraculous is revealed in her wondrously exquisite paintings though it is clear that the radicalism of this culturally located subjectivity is



the only way that the ‘nature’ of her quotations and montages can be articulated. From this perspective it is possible to talk about stereotypes, or even the trivia that permeate some of her series of paintings not only in their iconography, but also in formal aesthetic terms because the unconscious does not know aesthetic differences. It cannot separate kitsch from art, quotation from original, or atmosphere from realisation.

Following the completion of her Mozart paintings (*Ohne Titel* [Untitled], 1995), the cycle first shown in 1996, and *Jäger* (Hunters, 2003), Monika Baer has recently begun a new series of work. To date she has completed two large-format paintings, both *Ohne Titel* (Untitled, 2004) that set out the terms for variations in paintings to follow. As before, she reworks specific subjects familiar from earlier series while introducing a new context in which those motifs and gestures are fundamentally transformed. In these paintings, she also brings new elements into play: representational elements such as birch trees, landscape segments, a Noh mask, a skull and the portrait of a girl; as well as a new concern with extreme contrasts of light and dark. Baer seems to want to experience (though never fully understand) her subjects anew in black and white. She plans to draw with white paint onto black carton, and to project a near reversal of the classic composition from light to dark, as can be seen in recent

Left
Unter Birken (Under Birch Trees), coloured pencil and gouache on black paper, 29.7cm x 41.8cm, 2004

Right
Ohne Titel (Untitled), coloured pencil on black paper, 29.8cm x 42cm, 2004

paintings such as *Unter Birken* (Under Birch Trees, 2004) or *Ohne Titel* (Untitled, 2004). At this stage the development of her research remains vague, but the two new paintings illustrate it as a brilliant technical experiment. The artist atmospherically charges the picture planes — which could be described as a landscape with a horizon or a kind of ruined romantic interior — by employing a mixed technique of painting on thin unprimed cotton that emulates the effects of watercolour painting. Even though the dissonance of associations may seem bleaker than ever, the main oddities of both compositions — masks, portrait fragments and a skull — emerge like illuminated porcelain from out of the slightly darker dust of a diffuse background space. In one of the paintings, these elements are accompanied by a group of birch trees in front of a landscape of lakes; in the other one, the head is flanked by a fantastic brick fireplace with a cave of books on one side and a moss green pillar of smoke on the other. But none of these signifiers explain the appearance of heads in different versions, and even less so the tender, flowing strands of hair. To relate the strangeness of this constellation to romanticism might almost seem banal. But in this period it is indeed the fog, dust and smoke of a pipe or a fireplace that dissolve physical locations into the uncanny depth of an imaginary and dreamlike world. The



Ohne Titel (Untitled), (in progress)
watercolour, acrylic and oil on cotton, 180cm x 280cm, 2004

following lines from *Illuminations: Vigils* by Arthur Rimbaud suit Monika Baer’s paintings perfectly: ‘The wall facing the watcher is a psychological succession of cross-sections of friezes, atmospheric layers, and geological strata. Intense and fleeting dream of sentimental groups with every kind of being in every possible manifestation.’²

The mysterious hair in Monika Baer’s new paintings could be counted among Rimbaud’s dreamlike elements. Hair has a longer lifespan than human flesh, an almost eternal materiality that is partly responsible for the disgust and repulsion it often evinces. In Baer’s paintings the strands of hair have an undulation all their own and refuse to attach themselves to the morbid combination of a portrait with a mask and a skull. Conventionally the face, which is firstly the physical location of vision and by extension the gaze, vision or dream, comes to stand for human essence itself, while in contrast, the mask could be described as a mediated face somewhere between a portrait and a skull. In this sense the beautiful, lean birch trees may refer to a classically poetic, Nordic horizon, while the rendering of its bark answers to a compositional question of light and dark, black and white. Seen in relation to the shining source of ‘enlightenment’, these works recall the time when the spectres of the forest and the soul were granted their grand entrance as figures of both

symbolism and psychoanalysis. Yet they also shift into a dense sequence of single images that are transposed into one another, completely denying the finality of one single narrative.

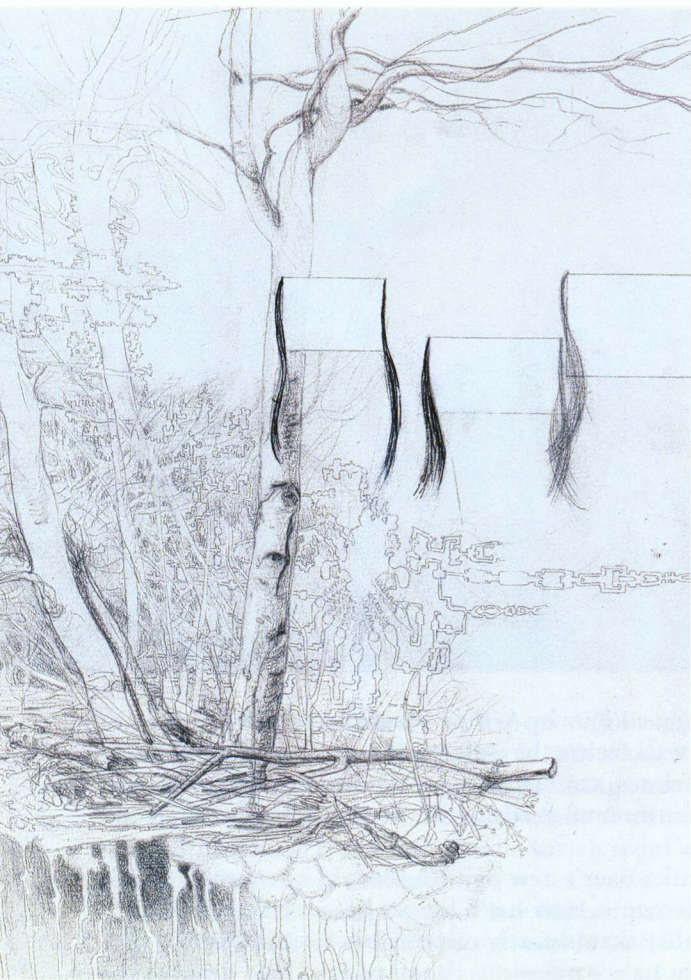
Sigmund Freud employed the 'rebus' as a device to explain the dream-work. The rebus, or picture puzzle, became very popular in the second half of the 19th century, using pictograms, numerals, single letters and algebraic signs as a symbolic language. A minus sign can, for example, stand literally for a pause, or count as a mathematical function. In Monika Baer's recent work we can find a parallel to this kind of technical translation of 'dream thoughts' into 'dream-content'. One example would be the white rectangles with long wisps of hair dangling from their sides as seen in *Drei* (Three, 2004). As literally empty pieces of paper, whiter than the background they are painted on, the rectangles superimpose a kind of naturalised or emotionally charged space. At the same time those blank, miniature prospectuses unfold a precarious physicality through the strands of hair framing them like a face. This depiction permits a slippery play between the medium and the body, one that continues without ever leading to representation. As Friedrich Kittler writes about the characteristics of mediated organisations: 'the translation of a rebus fails

because letters don't appear in nature – and they are the reference point for all translations'.³ White surfaces similarly react; they do not exist in nature but, nevertheless, mark the condition for its visual representation.

Those traits that reveal Monika Baer's paintings as 'untranslatable', in the sense of the transfer of content between different media, are the least calculated ones. Instead, they are arranged with the accuracy of the unconscious where the affects communicate themselves as mediated effects. The zapping and switching between different iconographies, pictograms, aesthetic techniques and sediments of cultural and historic epochs, the high and low, knowing and feeling, definitive places and meanderings, must ultimately be understood as references to subjective, that is cultural, desire.

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Friedrich Kittler,
*Discourse Networks
1800/1900* (trans.
Michael Metteer
and Chris Cullens),
Stanford University
Press, 1990.

Drei (Three), pencil
and gouache on paper,
32cm x 23.9cm, 2004



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With Respect to Disrespect

– John Chilver

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At the Crossroads of Painting

– Adam Berg