

Press release

Galerie Fons Welters

27 May – 8 July 2006

Opening Saturday 27 May 17:00 – 19:00

Opening hours: Tuesday to Saturday, 13:00 – 18:00

Rob Birza

Beautiful Misery

Images of bombings, fighter aircraft, refugees, demonstrators, disaster survivors and wailing women are standard fare in our newspapers and news broadcasts. This presentation of misery is part of our everyday reality: we are bombarded with it. Even so, these horrors barely touch us, as if they did not belong to reality. We have become blinded by the surplus of images. Some artists are concerned to explore this loss of our experience of reality. Maurizio Cattelan tied string round the necks of boy dolls and hung them from a tree in Milan (*Untitled*, 2004). The reactions to this artwork – a piece of fiction – were in general far stronger than those to photographs of the umpteenth bomb attack in Baghdad claiming dozens of victims. The question that arises is: When does something take on real meaning in our experience?

In 'Beautiful Misery' **Rob Birza** presents pen-and-ink drawings with subjects derived from newspaper photographs taken in countries including Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran and Pakistan. The drawings, with their surfeit of misery, have great aesthetic value. This ambivalence places us viewers in an uncomfortable position. Should we feel involved in the misery or is it permissible for us to enjoy the beauty of the drawings?

From the projection of a newspaper photograph on a sheet of paper, Birza selects the lines and motifs that appeal to him most. So he may decide to make lines taut, thick, thin and hazy or speckled. In some cases he emphasises only the contours, and in others he chooses to highlight a particular detail. His choice is always motivated by aesthetic considerations. Instead of looking at the image as a whole, he engages with the formal aspects of the photograph. Thus the pen and ink drawings of women standing with despair visible in their eyes become almost decorative, as a result of the splendid floral motifs in their clothes. Another drawing presents military helicopters, in spite of the obvious threat they pose, as magnificent stylised shapes in a skyscape.

Can we look at images and see only their formal qualities? Is it possible to hear, smell, feel, taste and see things without linking them to what we know – without naming them? Do we not link what our senses perceive directly to words, contextualisations, and even immediately to our own experience? It is impossible to see the images of misery in the Arab world that **Rob Birza** shows us as pure form. Even though he has divested the images of their political and social context, emphasising only their aesthetic qualities.

If we allow ourselves to be seduced by the beauty of **Rob Birza's** drawings and to be carried away by their formal qualities, we may be able briefly to forget their significance. After this experience of beauty, however, we are reminded of the reality and origins of their existence, which we cannot contemplate without emotion. Precisely because the images do not have any immediate meaning, since they are depicted not as representations of real events but in a sense designed to emphasise their beauty, Birza gives us the space to truly experience the images. The focus on form compels us to name them ourselves, thus linking them to our own experience; they become internalised. The meaning is not conveyed to us; we are induced to produce it ourselves. This contrasts starkly with the newspaper reports, which are immediately clear and which we can assign to specific categories: such reports scarcely evoke any emotion, since we do not experience these things ourselves.

'Beautiful Misery' is not in the first place about displaying misery and raising our awareness about situations that exist in the Arab world. It is about resensitising us – creating space for fundamental emotions such as pain and beauty in the images we see every day. **Rob Birza** shows us that something has happened to our perceptions – that experiences have actually become rare.

[Laura van Grinsven]