

Dr. Melanie Franke: Metamorphosis insectorum (EN)

Ursula Goeb can be associated with the Belgian artist Jan Fabre on the basis of her love of drawing, a form of artistic expression capable "of transforming," for example, "an insect into a celestial body", and for her love of entomology, of the insect world, the world of beetles. In the sphere of art, this is a terrain that is less than frequently traversed since bugs are inclined to instil in most people a profound sense of unease.

In drawing, all kinds of things can be transformed, can metamorphose. The independence of the line, its sensuous, haptic quality, is capable of giving an insect a sensory presence insofar as the sensitive and open flow of lines traces its condition and gives rise to metamorphosis. Together with the object of desire, a pure expressivity evolves. Comparable things happen in the insect world: from larva to chrysalis to butterfly - the metamorphosis of the same substance into another being. The assumption that insects are "primitive creations engendered from rotting mud" can be traced back to Aristotle. How these devilish creatures could hatch into the most stunning moths and butterflies was still a mystery back then. The entomologist Jean-Henri Fabre, by contrast, viewed insects within a broader context. "Insects," he wrote, "reveal life in the unconquerable diversity of its expression" and help us "to go some way towards deciphering the darkest book of all, namely the book about ourselves." According to Fabre, insects are a reflection of our soul as opposed to being mere tiny animals.

The collection of different insects in the form of photographs, pictures and real creatures, alongside the observation of the lives of butterflies and caterpillars, is Ursula Goeb's great passion. In her oeuvre, myriads of insects tumble around on the surface of the paper. In gentle lines, with wild strokes, or carefully painted surfaces, Ursula Goeb liberates herself from her object, although she continually feels her way back to the figure or the animal as she works. At times, her precise gaze captures a cocoon or an insect leg, detailed right down to the tiniest hair. At other times, her drawing hand is able to compliantly grasp the creature's essence and movement. The shapes are soft and the colours flowing. Nothing is static, motionless or fixed; everything is in flux. Heavy, dark lines, which seem to be slowly winding, run into transparent surfaces and entwine with one another; threads weave to become a cocoon. Where everything is kept in dark shades - brown, grey, black - the speed and tempo of the lines are particularly pre-eminent. A rhythm of gentle, fragile lines, thick strokes, broken and dense surfaces emerges. Jan Fabre can be cited again and again in this regard, for according to him, a good work of art is constituted by "the right line in the right place at the right time". Hence, it takes a certain degree of practice to find the right respective position, speed and time for a particular line.

The rough surfaces of the paper, the torn edges and uneven structures also deserve attention, since they form the underlying pattern upon which the creatures either take shape, adopting the form of insects, or remain amorphous. Layers of paper, transparent and opaque, are part of the process; they form the aesthetic substance. Fluorescent yellow checked patterns stand in sharp contrast to the otherwise plain colouring; the wild, unrestrained pen strokes are contrasted with the regular, harmonious order.

In visual terms, Ursula Goeb's torn and glued pieces of paper (*papier collé*) recall netlike fissured formations similar to the ones we encounter in *craquelure*, albeit considerably enlarged. The term *craquelure* refers to the structures that can emerge in thick layers of paint in the course of the ageing process. Biomorph structures can become a patina. Yet in Ursula Goeb's work the structures are coarser and in no way decorative.

Rather, she explores the properties of different materials and applies them in line with their individual characteristics: charcoal, chalk, wax are afforded as much attention as the variety of paper. Cut, torn or crumpled up pieces of paper and tangled fibres are affixed to the pictures which are painted with acrylic and wax. Even the paint, itself, plays a role, forming a transparent surface, a blob, or applied in strong, thick layers.

Thus, during the creative process the materials undergo multiple stages of metamorphosis, for Ursula Goeb paints with an innate sense of corporeal motion and rhythm, non-figuratively. She is not concerned with forms of imitation or description as such, but rather with the expression of nature and creatureliness: animals and landscape formations emerge from the curve of a line, from

the open and sensitive style with which she senses the conditions of a creature. In the manifold layers, elements are condensed and relationships emerge: things and figures appear. Nothing in these images seems immovable or final; everything remains in flux, *panta rhei*. As in hazy photographs, where we believe we can identify things through squinting eyes, the various signs reveal themselves to be insect wings, legs and other tiny creatures. They remain ambiguous, open, in a liminal state between definite forms and vague allusions. Frequently a product of mixed media, the works of Ursula Goeb can be situated in a realm between abstraction and figuration, in the in-between. Line versus surface, figurative versus abstract, deep versus shallow, each heightened in their juxtaposition, in the in-between.

Ursula Goeb finds a precursor in the art of Fritz Winter whose basic crystalline patterns and organic structures sought to render visible the processes of growth within nature. Ursula Goeb's experimental approach to material and colour, her daubographies, so to speak, were anticipated in the tachiste works of Emil Schuhmacher. Even if Goeb is not directly influenced by these artists - both Schuhmacher and Winter exerted considerable influence over the development of post-1945 abstract art in Germany - definite parallels can nevertheless be drawn between the works.

Characteristic for this kind of art, comprising as it does both figurative and abstract elements, is a principal openness. The pictures are never "finished" in a conventional sense, but rather preserve a state of suspense-filled, fragile balance; they maintain an open-endedness.

The artist Willi Baumeister once described this openness as the "creation of miracles", according to which the artist sets herself or himself a goal at the start of the creative process, but with a prior consciousness of its unattainability. The goal becomes an illusory one, since the creative process is gradually permeated by unknown forces that lead the artist to a result different from the one envisaged. In Baumeister's view, this deviation can hardly be equated with loss, but rather with a desirable "creative angle". The ›dedication of the self‹ to mysterious forces, which elude rational consciousness, and which exclusively articulate themselves in the act of creation, is based on an automatism whose roots can be found in Surrealism. In automated processes the controlling influence of the artist is decimated in order to clear the way for ›other forces‹. The inventor of *écriture automatique*, André Breton, once described the process as follows: "The essential discovery is that, without preconceived intention, the pen that flows in order to write and the pencil that runs in order to draw spin an infinitely precious substance (...)".

The secret, mysterious forces at work in the art of Ursula Goeb effect a state of suspension which, upon apprehension, truly inspires the imagination of the viewer. The apparent incompleteness and open-endedness inspire us to think our way into the forms she creates, to invent stories. All of a sudden, an insect turns out to be a celestial body, rises up into the sphere of infinite imagination, and blossoms into the most beautiful flower.

Translation Dr. Catherine Nichols, April 2006