

Patricia Waller, *Innocent*

9 May through 30 June, 2018

Patricia Waller's current exhibition "Innocent" is dedicated to the various forms of violence against the weakest within our society, against children. These images and reports are far too familiar to us from the world's areas of crisis: hunger, traumas, displacement, children soldiers, rape, sexual slavery, disfiguration, and death overlay the manifold other forms of emotional and physical violence that are also far too frequently present in our own society.

Waller uses eye-catching stereotypes familiar to us from media reports and aid appeals. The clichéd use of these images is reinforced by the fact that the figures are reminiscent of dolls, emphasizing the cuteness factor. It is important for the emphatic reaction of the viewer that the children exhibit different racial characteristics in hair color and skin, making it more difficult to reduce the topic to a problem that only concerns far away and exotic regions (such as Syria), which would remain abstract and possibly without immediate relevance for the viewer. Waller also deliberately refrains from the kind of ironic exaggerations so characteristic of her other works. Even the usual rivers of blood are used very sparingly here: these images are poignant enough as they are. The crochet work sculptures—freestanding and as wall sculptures—are complemented by a number of works of embroidery on colored and patterned fabrics, giving the impression of drawings.

Christian occidental culture is deeply informed by the concept of guilt. The biblical Fall forms the basis for the connection of sin and knowledge, for it was the act of eating the forbidden fruit from the tree of knowledge that brought about the expulsion of Adam and Eve from paradise. Ever since, in the view of Christianity, has man been fundamentally a sinner, cursed with the hereditary guilt of this original transgression. Even though Christianity specifically included children in the concept of the original sin—the souls of newborn babies were considered lost if they died before their baptism—the Romantic philosophers and poets of the early 19th century (Herder, Schiller, Hölderlin, Novalis, Schlegel, among others) developed a new idea of the child idealizing it as a symbol for the state of naïve, paradisiacal innocence before the original sin. This image of the child is still very much alive today. Even in the context of (German) penal law this connection of knowledge and guilt is fundamental as the *mens rea* (the knowledge that an act is violation of the law), in the case of children and minors in the form of the (not yet fully developed) capacity of discernment.

In the countless wars of the present age children are usually the first victims: collateral damage that is as a rule cynically accepted by all parties involved in a conflict. Still without physical or emotional resilience and accordingly helpless, they suffer grievous emotional and physical injuries affected their entire lives. The sense of caretaking that is inherent in all humans with regard to children makes these images of their suffering particularly unbearable, especially with the background of their perceived innocence.

Waller's works are bound to affect us—they force us to confront a theme that is within the responsibility of every one of us.