

No More Fun and Games

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(From the catalogue *Patricia Waller: Wicked, wicked wool*; Galerie Deschler, 2022; © Michael Hübl)

Patricia Waller's works are mean. Even worse: they are common. Everyone knows the photos, the news, reports, TV programs inevitably evoked by Waller's works. A upturned bike with a broken handlebar, a bleeding boy on the ground: associations with fatal traffic accidents are at the ready. A blond boy with pants around his ankles, next to a bishop's rod: reports on child abuse by church dignitaries come to mind right away. A boy and a girl with grenade throwers in their hands: immediately we think of those who, with promises or threats, were turned into child soldiers. It is not the objects or sequin images by Patricia Waller that are mean. Mean, in the sense of bad and morally reprehensible, are the facts and conditions she focuses on. And yet it is also due to the work itself, to their design and materiality, that they cause irritation—discomfort, uneasiness, chills.

The horror reports of the mass media have been taken up and reflected on by artists in various ways; the best known is probably Andy Warhol's "Death and Disaster" series. But while Warhol intensifies the reports from the daily press ("129 Die in Jet!", 1962) by multiplication (and thus characterizes it as a mass-produced article), Waller proceeds in a much milder manner by converting the information raw material flooding the world and thus generally available into handicraft products. Where others rely on outdoing reality, Waller builds on devoted transformation. Whereas Damian Hirst used a real shark in formaldehyde for his object "The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living" (1991), the shark in Waller's "Accident 3" (2003) is made of wool.

This is exactly what is so disturbing in Patricia Waller's works. They are crocheted, sometimes knitted, they are soft, suggesting wellbeing. Even if they have been made of sequins, as in some recent works, they seem made for cozy corners and comfort zones. If it were not for the messages and the stories they convey: the leg between predatory the teeth of a fish of prey, the cut-off thumb, the bleeding skulls hit by a flower pot, a flatiron or a jet plane. The discrepancy between the materiality of the work and the facts they refer to is glaring.

To say it with a metaphor: it strikes the eye. It hurts. But the discrepancy not only hurts because of the obvious contradiction manifested in the juxtaposition of cozy design and cruel narrative, but because it tears a wound. A wound that acts like an existential threat. By gently coating fear and terror, she shines a spotlight on a behavior, with which probably most people go through life. They repress disturbing moments, block out latent dangers, ignore the fact that they could at any moment be affected by wars, climate catastrophes, epidemics, indeed that every new day is a bet on the future. This tacit agreement with themselves and reality is what Waller disturbs and destroys with her work.

Repressing, hiding, ignoring are individual psychological mechanisms of protection. At the same time, they are part of a cultural practice. This, in turn, hosts a rich repertoire of ways of making us forget the severities and dark sides of reality beneath

the smokescreen of everyday life. Fairy tale characters and stage luminaries, legendary figures, movie stars or other celebrities serve all as projection screens for small escapisms. This is another area targeted by Patricia Waller. Not only does she, with her work, generally pull the rug out from under any kind of illusion of a wholesome world, she also takes aim at the figures used in this sugarcoating of reality. Her series "Broken Heroes" provides an inventory of failure: Ernie, the vivacious fellow from the TV series "Sesame Street", ends up in the gutter, complete with rubber duckie, Minnie Mouse, the cutie from Disney Studios, becomes a victim of rape, Superman dies, Spiderman is caught in a huge net.

Even if she claims the opposite: armed with a crochet hook, Waller follows the principle "Kill your idols!" And does not stop at idols, either. Even peaceful spaces such as gardens where everything revolves around care and growth, turn into sites of murder and bloodshed—"Happy Gardening" as a feast of slaughter with spades and lawnmowers. Again, it is not simply the external circumstances addressed by Waller. Rather, she raises crucial questions such as the respectful treatment of nature. In any case, Waller's concern is more profound than the first astonishing, even shocking, impression suggests. She digs up popular but meaningless ideas that have been deposited in the collective subconscious like sinterings, exposes the clichés that carve out a miserable existence behind the cheerful glow of purported normality, and time and again exposes the subcutaneous, as it were, potential for violence behind appearances.

A woman sawn in half ("Sawed Virgin", 2014)? Sure, just a magic trick. But how much aggression is contained in this spectacular stage number? And what image of women is perpetuated in the jokes alluded to in her "henpecked husband" multiples? Whether a pan or rolling pin: both suggest the image of an enraged harridan using kitchen tools to greet the inebriated husband with a strong blow to the head. Waller consistently moves in those gray areas of cheerful ingenuousness in which fun suddenly turns into severity. See, for example, the pink-and-sky-blue piece of fabric printed with bears, bunnies, and hobby horses, on which a sentence is embroidered in awkward handwriting. The work is reminiscent of home textiles from the age of our great-grandparents sporting guidelines such as "There's no place like home" or "Honesty is the best policy." In this case the inscription reads: "My dad loves my pussy."

It is hard to tell whether in the past children were better protected from sexual abuse than today. For the present, however, Patricia Waller's message is unmistakable: no more fun and games. The maxim extends to her entire more recent work. The tongue-in-cheek play with puns and pain is passé. While in the past the artist often left room for a liberating laugh even in the mostly macabre settings, she now, in her series entitled "Victim", "Child" or "No" shows unambiguous defensive gestures or creates stylized children's portraits where the horror is writ large in their faces. Even the head shot scenes made of countless sequins leave no doubt about their ominous content.

All misery, dystopia, hopelessness? Not quite. Patricia Waller hints at a glimmer of hope. Her "Sheep" (2007) looks as if its light wool is being teased apart mesh by mesh as with a sweater. This procedure could theoretically be applied to those terrifying depictions knitted or crocheted by Waller. Transposing this to general

conditions this would mean: nothing is so enmeshed and entangled that it cannot be changed. To then, after successful surgery, remove the stitches from the world.