

Wolfgang Ullrich

Against the Impositions of the Present: Armin Boehm's Society Portraits

In a 2019 interview, Armin Boehm said that we are “possibly [...] living in a digital Middle Ages.”¹ That this statement is not exactly to be taken as a compliment to the present should be apparent. But Boehm is not only suggesting that civilization may have regressed from standards once attained; he is also considering whether painting today might have a function similar to that which Hieronymus Bosch once probably fulfilled best. Is it not therefore once again a matter of painting figures of the times “ugly [in order] to reproduce them faithfully” and at the same time “to distance oneself from their deformed appearance”? All the supposed fantasy in Bosch's paintings, indeed the many drastic details and creepy creatures, would then have to be understood as a kind of defensive magic. In this way, the artist tried to keep at bay the impositions of his present, which was dominated by fanaticism and fears. And Armin Boehm sees himself in a comparable role: as a painter, he mobilizes apotropaic energies to banish the “extreme polarities” that he currently experiences as particularly oppressive and to create, at best, “an ideology-free space” in his paintings.

He elaborates on this, explaining at the same time why he gives today's Middle Ages the attribute “digital.” The fact that the age of smartphones and the Internet, and above all social media (*Facebook, Instagram, TikTok*, etc.) fosters these polarizations is obvious in that the much greater visibility of (almost) everything and everyone compared to earlier times requires techniques of complexity reduction, more generalized perspectives, and clarity. Where countless images are in circulation, in particular of people, they, above all, need an image, a trademark that is as striking as possible: formulaic, clichéd, and easily recognizable. Instead of “recognizing people in their differentiations,” they are “immediately divided into heroes and villains.” And the contrast between “good” and “evil” is further heightened in social media by the fact that like-minded people largely keep to themselves, mutually reinforcing their prejudices and thus exacerbating them even more radically. The “longing for the unambiguous” is “very pronounced,” according to Armin Boehm, noting with disconcertment that “people [...] have never had such a resemblance to cartoons as they do today.” Even a politician who “in the digital age” is “permanently in the focus of the public and the media [...] hides [...] his real face behind a crudely carved mask.”

It is no less true for many other people: they acquire an artificial second face, which not only has to be photogenic and distinctive in order to shape and convey their image, but which also ideally protects them, because it conceals their private, vulnerable selves. With professionally trained facial expressions one can communicate much more clearly while at the same time concealing much more than without such training. Digital masks and filters or elaborate makeup and face painting, which used to be popular only at carnivals and among soccer fans yet are now very popular in social media production, lead to a bold exaggeration of the face. The association with cartoon figures is often unavoidable, and similarly many disguises

¹ Here and after: Tim Ackermann: “Boschs Homeboy,” in: *Weltkunst* 157 (2019), from: <https://www.weltkunst.de/kunstwissen/2019/08/boschs-homeboy>.

pointedly confess their world view, instead of simply surprising with elegant, funny, or bizarre forms.

The masquerades of the digital present as well as some of its popular symbols – from the rainbow to Pepe the Frog – are the starting point for Armin Boehm’s paintings, which are at once analytical-realistic and surreal-fantastic. In them, in the tradition of the great tableaus of society and manners, ranging from James Ensor to Max Beckmann, from Otto Dix to Jörg Immendorff, a multifigured “theatrum mundi” is staged, in which the roles of dogmatist or apocalyptic are particularly coveted. At the same time, however, the black-and-white contrast typical of the “digital Middle Ages” provides the painter with a good strategy for putting himself and his audience at a safe distance from all the ideologues who on and offline every day are pitted against each other. In Boehm’s own words, all one has to do is choose “two symbols” that are “socially [...] differently charged” and place them right next to each other in the picture, then “the cliché [...] is neutralized by the counter-cliché.”

Boehm reveals here ambitions similar to those of some other artists who, for their part, find the present too shrill, many of its protagonists too self-righteous, and are concerned that art, too, could become increasingly ideological, now that the themes and worldviews presented in curated major events and numerous activist happenings are already more important than anything else. As a countermove to these developments, Jonathan Meese proclaims a “dictatorship of art” that should renounce any ideology and which he describes with the term “TOTAL NEUTRALITY.” And like Boehm, Meese also practices in many works a juxtaposition of respectively strong motifs; for example, combining the Nazis with something cute with the goal of binding together all ideologically captivating forces to render them absurd and ineffective.

While neutralizing through contrast, Boehm’s paintings also feature a host of other iconographic maneuvers. They underscore his chosen affinity to Hieronymus Bosch. For, as in Bosch’s paintings, one often has the impression in Boehm’s pictures that the longer you look, the deeper you penetrate the world. What first appears is only a façade that, opening up, reveals what lies behind or underneath, which – not more true or real – reveals itself to be a mere layer, a window dressing concealing something else, which nevertheless comes to light and rises to the surface. It is precisely in his translation of the charade into painting that the lack of distinction between the disguise and the disguised becomes evident. Rather, every layer, every opening, everything that is concealed or exposed, appears only as another element of an endless travesty. Men are just as much women or yet men again; white people are people of color; old people are at once much younger; a figure is garish and ashen, seems cheeky and sad and evil. Individual body parts – the tongue, an eye, a hand – become independent, change their form or position and appear all the more like another element of an exalted staging.

Armin Boehm takes the penchant for masquerade to the extreme; he exaggerates and satirizes what is happening in today’s society and social media until everything becomes an uncanny farce. Yet, in doing so, it appears in the end only comically grotesque and absurd, allowing us to find that yearned-for distance from our own present. It is all the more successful when



Boehm questions the overabundance accumulated in complex layers in his illusionistic pictorial spaces by suddenly transforming individual parts of the picture into color field painting to become patterns. The masks and bodies, which are superimposed on one another in countless layers, suddenly lose their volume and become devoid of reference and weight. At the same time, Boehm grants the viewers of his paintings semantic breathing room through these abstractions. For their part, they allow us to detach ourselves from the ideological din that is otherwise so often annoying.

Boehm succeeds in neutralizing in several ways. And even if he does not offset the “digital Middle Ages” with utopian otherworldliness, he is able to make it visible and to transfer it into painting so that it comes into its own – once again in its long history – as a medium particularly suited to reflection and articulation of contemporaneity. This works all the better because Boehm, in his painting style, use of color, and formal language, does not indulge in quoting typical digital effects, such as a pixel aesthetic or a vaporwave style; that is, he does not strive for post-Internet art, but rather draws from the repertoire of possibilities that modernism, with its many isms and movements, has made available. Yet, the idea of autonomy remains associated with all of them today: the artistic self-confidence of being able to assert oneself against an external world, no matter how powerful it may be. Boehm draws on this and makes modernism’s methods fruitful in a new way. This applies not only to color field painting, reminiscent of Orphism or Constructivism, but also, for example, to color contrasts, as first used by the Fauvists, or in places a gestural use of brush and paint. In this way, Boehm demonstrates that all these methods are also and especially suitable today for confronting the present without doubling its shrillness, for transforming it without cowering before it.