

RENÉ LUCKHARDT

ANAMORPHIC OR APPARENTLY ANAMORPHIC TESTPIECE

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Press release

Anamorphic iconoclasm

Again and again the same face is to be seen; but again and again it looks different. René Luckhardt has chosen a historical portrait of the poet Eric Stenbock as the leitmotif for his latest group of works. The artist transferred the 19th century photographic model to multiple canvas formats of different sizes and intensified its light-dark contrast—the portraits are painted in van Dyck brown tones on canvas. The painting appears as distant as if the original had been constantly reproduced, inscribing traces of the mechanical copying process into the picture. But that is not all—even the proportions of the individual portraits have changed. Their aspect ratios are distorted not only in the second, but also in the third dimension. René Luckhardt has sculpturally reshaped his paintings, stretching and compressing them both horizontally and vertically, as well as inserting them into each other. The paintings penetrate each other by means of openings in the picture surface and open up multi-dimensional perspectives. The portraits, crossed at right angles, expand sculpturally into space. In this way, instead of classical busts, Luckhardt creates multi-layered and distorted portraits. The multi-part and multi-page tableaux are interlaced in a constructivist manner, stretched into a surface with inclined planes, or stacked in height, thus creating forms such as folding signs, crosses, boxes, see-saws or pillars. The portrait sculptures are embedded in pigmented concrete pedestals, providing them with a stable and colorful base. When a row of portraits is stacked on top, the column seems like a totem of cultural history.

Although the artist conventionally painted only the front of the canvas, the backs are also worth seeing, as they reveal the materiality of the image and thus the iconic status of the portraits. The depictions are confusing due to the anamorphic effect that Luckhardt gave them. Ordinary two-dimensional anamorphoses only reveal their subject realistically as the vantage point of the viewer changes, i.e. when extreme spatial positions are taken from the lateral perspective of which the painterly distortion is compensated for. In Luckhardt's case, the angled portrait sculptures require a multitude of viewpoints in order to capture the work in a perspective-corrected manner—a crazy, even impossible challenge to the imagination.

The repetition and transformation of the same portrait motif are intrinsic to the series. Looking at the subject automatically activates the human facial recognition reflex. The twisted portrait sculptures actually show only one person, but the poet becomes a multiple personality. Not only has Luckhardt distorted the human scale, he has also fragmented it. Halved countenances or cutouts of only the eye areas of the face almost create an alienating effect, rendering the depicted person hardly identifiable. Luckhardt already worked with this strategy in previous series: Either the portraits were gutted by revealing a square hole in the center of the picture instead of the face, as in the work groups from 2016 and 2017, or pictorial fragments overlapped and eye areas appeared several times amidst monochrome color surfaces. Luckhardt takes the spatial torsion of the classical portrait to the extreme and assembles the paintings into cubic boxes, thus turning the surfaces into volumes. Portraits of Donald Trump, Cab Calloway, Elsa von Freytag Loringhoven, Marjorie Cameron

and Margaret Rutherford were already created in the previous work groups in 2016. The thematic novelty of the most recent works lies in their concentration on a single artistic figure: in the current exhibition, Luckhardt obsessively devotes himself to the figure of the poet Count Stanislaus Eric Stenbock (1860-1895). The examination of the writer's portrait, in turn, is due to the fascination with this type of artist. His contemporary William Butler Yeats called the only recently rediscovered Stenbock a "scholar, connoisseur, drunkard, poet, pervert, most charming of men," and one of the most magnificent examples of decadence at the fin de siècle of the 19th century. Stenbock was also acquainted with Oscar Wilde—though not a friend—whose story of Dorian Gray is recalled by Luckhardt's treatment of Stenbock's portrait. But Stenbock died of his addiction to narcotics at the age of 35, leaving behind a limited, but intense, body of work of suicidal poetry and morbid short stories.

Luckhardt's treatment of the poet's portrait appropriates the romantic artist's aesthetics and includes the uncanny, because Stenbock's picture also evokes memories of Edgar Allen Poe, the creator of dark horror stories.

The Romantic artistic genius who gazes back at you from all sides is portrayed in Luckhardt's anamorphic portraits in such a distorted way that only a vague indication of his personality remains. It is not really about the individual but rather about the individual gesture of romantically and excessively determining one's own life. Luckhardt is only too happy to use this beautiful cliché and, in return, lets the literary discovery Stenbock flash up like an apparition. The artist and his artist-artist—Luckhardt takes the matter seriously, yet shows how he breaks the mode of any reverential representation with his material and painting style. It is not the monumental figure, which never existed, but the non-monumental form of its representation that makes the portraits relevant. Like Hans Belting describes the "impossibility to represent a face" in his book "Face and Mask. A Double History", Eric Stenbock's face in Luckhardt's portrait sculptures remains a moving "vanishing point", subject to constant transformation.

Luckhardt rises above the tradition of the panel painting with humorous seriousness by paying homage to the masters of this subject. There are the reminiscences of Hans Holbein the Younger and his portrait of "The Ambassadors" (1533) with the distorted vanitas motif at its center and of the experiments of modern animation techniques with anamorphoses of satirical engravings, as recently shown in the Vienna exhibition "Vertigo". There are Picasso's Cubist portraits, Pop Art picture collages and the drawn anamorphoses of William Kentridge. And there are also multiple portraits such as Anselm Kiefer's woodcut gallery of German intellectual giants in "Ways of World Wisdom. Die Hermannsschlacht" (around 1978). But Luckhardt rejects the romantic, idealistic, pop or realistic images of his predecessors and, like Lucio Fontana, breaks up the surface of his portraits in order to expand them multi-dimensionally. In this way, the props of art history and the history of the face come and remain together in Luckhardt's work, revolving around their random leitmotif. The human, anthropomorphic portrait of the poet Eric Stenbock has been hit by an anamorphic iconoclasm.

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