

Relics

The Düsseldorf-based painter Stefan à Wengen (*1964 in Basel) calls his third exhibition at Bernhard Knaus Fine Art Gallery in Frankfurt am Main "Relics".

The artist likes to use English exhibition titles for his shows, as they remind him of earlier times when music was still a constituent element and possibly still contains a promise today. And since the English song language was not yet completely understandable in those youthful times, it seemed all the more mysterious for that reason, but in turn all the more understandable through the music.

In addition, the English word "Relic" has a double meaning, describing both a relic and a relict at the same time. This opposite meaning is of interest to à Wengen.

German etymology understands the word "Relikt" as a term for a residual form, a residue, something left behind or left over, a remnant of a bygone time.

The German "Reliquie", on the other hand, defines a religious veneration of a saint's bodily remains or an object derived from them, therefore a different kind of remnant. Accordingly, what artists leave behind also has something relic-like about it. Those Artists' legacies who sacrifice their lives for making art should therefore be much more of a relic than those of those art market stars, who are no longer discussed at all, but only adored.

"Detected Dictionary" is what à Wengen calls a project he started in 2014 and continued ad infinitum, a so-called dictionary in which the unattainability of the claim to completeness is also inscribed. The small paintings, which are exclusively in black and white, whether as a figuration, abstraction or even as a word image, refer explicitly to the written language. They are like small, modern relics because they are created in the perspective of infinity, like a saint's image that itself wants to represent infinity.

The three skulls "Homo Helveticus" made from dust are relics as well, or at least they have something fetish-like about them. From dust we came into being, dust we become, so these objects are a truly explicit, albeit tongue-in-cheek, self-portrait of the artist. Dust is the matter that actually "falls off". It consists of particles from the environment, from your own body or even from space. Dust is everywhere and is usually swept up or collected in vacuum cleaners. The artist first freezes fallen dust from his atelier for at least a week to kill bacteria, then presses it into a negative mold with a binding agent and then stuffs it. It is evident that one skull is darker in color than the others. This differing coloring is due to the fact that the artist collected

dust that fell off immediately after drawing large-format charcoal paintings. This dust mixed with the residual dust in à Wengen's studio. These skulls are relics in both regards in which time is literally inscribed.

The two charcoal paintings "Personal Queen I" and "Personal Queen II" (both 2023), depict jellyfish, also known as medusae. Their tentacles are feared, as was probably Medusa's snake head. At the same time they possess a beautiful, queen-like appearance. Their long-filamentous tentacles can represent a curtain, which seems to veil something. As with a queen with a long train, you shouldn't get too close to them either.

À Wengen's painting "The Mission (in der Mitte der Nacht beginnt der neue Tag)" (2015) shows a dense, primeval leaf curtain and, as everywhere in the jungle, actually hides the wild. Behind it proliferates adversity or paradise, at least it shows a so-called "Pastoral Landscape" or a "Pastoral Scene".

As part of the show, à Wengen presents for the first time a work as a wall projection with the title "Relics", whose 200 images are also residue or rather leftovers in a certain way. They all contain an essentiality for the artist because, as with the works in the "Detected Dictionary" series, they refer to collective memory, to art history and to individual memories. "I collect pictures, I grew up in the so-called Picture Generation," says the artist. "For example, I collect 100 pictures of a topic that really affects me, I choose 10 to make maybe 5 drawings or collages of them, to maybe paint one picture from them". For the first time, the artist grants us a glimpse into his leftover pictures, which, however, represent an important basis of his work.

While all paintings and images, including the projection, are entirely monochromatic, the artist treats us to colorful images of cowboys and rocking and rolling animals with realistically painted cows, zebras or horses on the mezzanine of the gallery. The latter refer to his first exhibition with Bernhard Knaus Fine Art and ultimately also testify to a certain melancholy, which is sometimes inherent in sentimentality: the memory not only understood as a relic or even as the form of a relict like perhaps a talisman or a precious painting, but also as an individual memory.

Daniela Melotti, March 2023