

Amedeo Polazzo

Die Strudlhofstiege

Herald St is pleased to announce *Die Strudlhofstiege*, the gallery's first exhibition with Amedeo Polazzo. Encompassing our Museum St premises, a specially conceived mural cradles a suite of paintings which float in and around it, the fresco secco and canvases in gentle dialogue. Polazzo's work embodies layers, palpable physically, narratively, and temporally. The tableaux and their painted support capture moments of intimate personal history, whimsical imaginings, and generic stock imagery, softly connected by subtle links which spark an undercurrent language.

The exhibition takes its title from a 1951 novel by Heimito von Doderer (itself named after a Jugendstil public staircase in Vienna) which is set during a period of political and psychological tumult in 1920s Austria. Polazzo describes its woven strands of time and story with resonances to his own work:

...It portrays individuals navigating a world in transition, filled with nostalgia for a vanished past and apprehension about an uncertain future. The historical and philosophical condition is a strong separation between individuals and society, which the characters are occupied to overcome. For Doderer this separation of inside and outside (Innen und Aussen) must be brought together such that they overlap, and in this process, the external world of everyday objects – a street, a café, a flight of steps – providing that the individual approaches them with the correct openness to life, can acquire real symbolic significance in terms of their own existence...

He often uses flashbacks, multiple perspectives, and shifts in focus to create a fragmented, layered narrative. These different threads overlap, periodically reconnect, and create a heterogeneous pattern. This is particularly interesting in connection with the number of protagonists and his understanding of time as something inward and subjectively experienced, a process which is no longer merely chronological. For the individual a past memory can at any moment overlay the present, and indeed, the past, if properly understood and come to terms with, is seen as the right and proper foundation for the present.

A swaying sense of time is similarly discernible in Polazzo's subjects and styles, with most paintings adhering to canonical genres such as allegory, landscape, vanitas, and portraiture. *Controcorrente* (Against the Current) continues a recent series of fruit carried by waves, a play on an Old Master subject with decidedly contemporary, store-bought appearances. There is joy and humour to the families of apples, nectarines, pears, and bananas swept away by the sea, and yet also an impending doom as if they were the victims of *The Raft of the Medusa*. *Tragicommedia* also offers a sort of vanitas, one that revels in ambiguity and timelessness: the lustrous tangle of iridescent and crystalline beads and gilded chains could be treasured antiques, but equally cheap eighties costume tat. And in *Einblicke* (Insights) and *Relief* we are presented with liminal phases of the day, with the warmth of waking or dozing and the diffused light of dawn or dusk filtered through a curtained net.

Another recurring concern for Polazzo is the domestic interior as a site of both comfort and danger. Recalling relocations which profoundly marked phases of his life, the artist examines the home as a protective space as well as a structure which separates us from outside threats. The mural's trompe-l'oeil architecture and the paintings' window-like vignettes of glowing hearths, steaming mocha, and close family members contribute to an aura of domesticity, one with hints of vulnerability. Within the smoky close-up views of *Flame Spirit* and *Angry Mother* emerge anthropomorphic faces and figures, which Polazzo likens to 'little ghosts'. Having recently become a father for the first time, the artist inserts putti-like babies in lush fantasy settings in *Rococo Reflections* and *The Föhn*, the latter title referring to a German expression for a sky so bright it induces a headache. Through these enigmatic scenes, Polazzo exposes an unease in the familiar.

Polazzo asserts that 'different narrative strands in a novel are a given, whereas in visual art it still presents a problem'. The body of work in *Die Strudlhofstiege* is an invitation to contemplate this problem, reading the paintings in various states of finish and solidity, and sinking into their overlapping planes of space and time, and pleasure and terror.

Text by Émilie Streiff