

ISA MELSHEIMER

Times are hard, but Postmodern

18/01–01/03/2014

opening 17 January 2014

Tuesday - Saturday, 11 am - 7 pm and by appointment

In the installation "Times are hard, but Postmodern", from which the exhibition takes its name, Isa Melsheimer lets her work coalesce with the spaces of the Galerie Jocelyn Wolff. In this way, the subject matter of the group of works shown in the current installative composition is mirrored by the gentle and almost playful dialogues Isa Melsheimer allows to unfold within the environments in which her exhibitions are held: few architectural eras are influenced as strongly by dialogue as postmodernism.

Primary shapes such as cones, balls, pyramids or cubes; hues of skin and sorbets; surfaces arranged in tiers, patterns that clash—the form and colour sphere of Isa Melsheimer's works evokes associations with the radical anti-design stance of the Memphis Group, known for reacting to modernism in favour of the emotional design of postmodernism.

With her wall-collage Isa Melsheimer cites the architect Charles Jencks who dates the symbolic end of modern architecture and the crossover to postmodernism at precisely 3:52 p.m. on 15 July 1972, the point in time when the Pruitt-Igoe housing project was demolished. The council estate, which had been euphorically celebrated as helping to shape the future, was completed in 1955 in St. Louis/Missouri. The chief architect, Minoru Yamasaki, followed the rational planning principles of Le Corbusier's modern residential machine. But this shining example of social housing was quickly lost to violence and vandalism, serving to this day as a symbol of the collapse of modern architecture and urbanism. Modernism is followed by an era of postmodern architecture that moves away from the totalitarian idea of a universal, rational, functional design principle, and towards a stylistically eclectic reactionary movement, opening itself up to local traditions and specific spatial factors.

Isa Melsheimer lets the hopes anchored in this urban and architectural development flourish in her works. Architectures in Rome capture her interest in particular: a city that has grown significantly historically. Contrary to Le Corbusier's city-sweeping visions for Paris – which included razing the historic centre to the ground to make room for perfectly aligned high rises, with only a handful of monuments to be spared – Rome's city planning is a reflection of what the architect Colin Rowe has referred to as a "collage city": a ceaseless process of fragmentation, collision and contamination of the disparate ideas of different generations.

In this light, Isa Melsheimer draws from the ideal urbanism of architecture groups such as UFO, Superstudio and their persiflage of the mega-structure "The Continuous Monument" or Archizoom Associati and their "No-Stop City" model. But in doing so, the artist also summons up a reflection of the same glorification of technology inherent in certain postmodern designs.

On one of her textile objects – reminiscent of George Hardie's illustrations – Isa Melsheimer stages a sensuously strong yet also provocative embroidery of two Roman constructions: the Pyramid of Cestius, a tomb dating back to 12 BC, and the Palazzo della Civiltà Italiana, completed in 1943 as part of Mussolini's city planning project EUR. These two structures are not located one next to the other in the city of Rome, nor can they be considered as being postmodern architectures in a historic context. And yet, they can be found in Isa Melsheimer's piece, side by side, thus underlining the collage-city idea of Rome as a metropolis that functions perfectly in its non-linear evolution.

Galerie Jocelyn Wolff

Isa Melsheimer's works also remind us that postmodernity may have kicked off idealistically with its willingness to re-emotionalise architecture after decades of having been pared down to functionality, but ended with Alessi corkscrews and sugar bowls.

In 1974 the designer Alessandro Mendini banished his Lassù chair objects in a ritualistic performance. In 1979, caught up in the thrill of postmodernity, he initiated the "Tea & Coffee Piazza" project with Alberto Alessi, presenting household goods as micro-architecture via Alessi's kitchenware company. Following this architectural manifesto, a number of international artists went on to creating tea and coffee sets for the line.

Among them Charles Jencks, who presented a declension of pillars of the antiquity with his set. In her cement-piece "Tea & Coffee, Piazza d'Italia in Post-Katerina Times", Isa Melsheimer combines Jencks' designs with the Piazza d'Italia, based on the designs of the architect Charles Willard Moore and erected in 1978 by the city of New Orleans in honour of its Italian community. Once heralded as the postmodern piazza par excellence, the site has since turned into an urban stomping ground, slowly being smothered under looming high rises. Hurricane Katrina has also raised new questions related to the city's urbanism.

Continuing her play on citations, Isa Melsheimer presents two shelf-like collages: ceramic vase objects cite Ettore Sottsass' architectural model-like "Yantra Vases" (1969) and also give a nod to Rem Koolhaas' "Delirious New York" (1978) manifesto. Three objects made using Tiffany technology echo the miniatures manufactured by furniture company Vitra: Sottsass' Carlton shelf, a roof system and star-shaped lampshade popular in Italy.

Isa Melsheimer uses wall painting to address the gallery's locality and history, lengthening lines und connecting dots. This too can be seen as flirting with the postmodern play with citations, with the ornamental, with skimming surfaces. Isa Melsheimer's gouache pieces collage together graphic elements with buildings located in Boston, Berlin, London and Rome. A fox references Isaiah Berlin's model of non-compartmentalised thinking as opposed to the successive thinking, based on a universal design principle, of the hedgehog.

The Italian proverb "Times are hard, but modern" was also picked up by German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk. In "Critique of Cynical Reason" (1983) Sloterdijk argues that cynicism served as an antithesis to the Greek Academy, an outlet for a disempowered population, which then turned sour under mercantile thinking in the modern industrial (or post-industrial) system.

In her tongue-in-cheek way Isa Melsheimer manages to rouse scepticism, making us wonder if postmodernism or other forms of radical individualism that start off full of hope and ideals, can in fact break from the past. If not, we must ask ourselves if they are merely epitomisations of the technologically rational, sober and functional efficiency of modernism – a particular manifestation of capitalism. Isa Melsheimer's works incite us to analyse the latitude in which resistance can unfold.

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