

"Portraits in their own right"

Gert Germeraad's exhibition "Home Sweet Home" at Kristianstad Art Gallery is an extensive and deep-going presentation of his work as an artist. A new series of portraits, which take their starting point in the Institute for Racial Biology in Uppsala, is presented along with a number of metaphorical self-portraits and abstract drawings. Several elements are woven together to present a multifaceted whole. It switches between the personal and the more universal. The suffering, oppression and vulnerability of the individual is connected to larger societal power structures, as well as being mirrored in the politically loaded sphere which makes up the home.

Gert Germeraad mainly works with portraits and sculpture, often in series, which take their starting point in a specific problem or event. The series mirror an investigative work within a defined area. The work often deals with a story or presents a reflection of a societal phenomena with political undertones, which it opposes or formulates a critique against. It seeks redemption from limiting and oppressive structures by proposing and enabling another story, another interpretation, but also making visible their power-political consequences in relation to the individual.

Germeraad's two latest works "From the Series on Racial Biology" (2010) and "From the Archives of the Gestapo" (2008) both show examples of this.

In earlier works, such as "Portrait of a Man" (2004-6), "The Four Temperaments Series" (2006) and the "The Physiognomy Series" (2003), Germeraad has been interested in scientific theories that in various ways have formulated systems or templates to enable the reading of a person's character, her interior by studying her exterior. What the exterior of a person, especially her face and facial features, can tell about her interior. In the series "Portrait of a Man", Germeraad takes his starting point in the work of the American psychologist Paul Ekman. Ekman claims that there exist a few "basic" facial features that are the same all over the world independent of culture. He describes these expressions as: anger, disgust, fear, joy, sadness and surprise. From this theory the artist creates a series of portraits of a man who exhibits all of Ekman's "basic" facial expressions. That which Gert Germeraad with great skill exposes with this work is that Ekman's scientific theory erases the individual and creates a generic prototype. Germeraad points attention to this by providing Ekman's prototype with an identity. I find myself immediately experiencing a relationship to the sculpted man and wondering who he is. In this way Germeraad does away with Paul Ekman's objectifying theory with his work.

The way I see it, the scientific theories that Gert Germeraad calls attention to with his work mirror highly existential questions, which address the

possibility of getting to know and gaining knowledge about the nature of human beings. It is accepted by many that a human being's interior in one way or another is mirrored in her exterior. However, the question is, in what way, or how, if possible, we can go about gaining knowledge about this interconnectedness. Through his artistic work, Germeraad sheds light on how science, particularly from a historic perspective, has addressed these questions. The problem seems to lie in science's blind faith in itself. The notion that it is possible, with the help of special measuring tools and a systematic analysis of the physical observable field, to gain knowledge about the interior field of human beings, that which by many would be referred to as the divine. This blind faith in science's ability mirrors a period in time when God had been proclaimed dead and when rationality and the intellect had been elevated to the new God through which we could reach insight into the nature of existence through systematic mental effort. Today the pendulum seems, in many places, to have begun to swing back. We have begun to realize the limitations inherent in this scientific approach at least when it comes to gaining knowledge about the interior human field. In the Middle Ages, knowledge of the soul and man's divine nature was a part of the collective consciousness, and knowledge about the mystical laws connected to the soul were alive and present. Here there is much to learn, not least from the medieval mystics who had great knowledge of the interplay between the soul and the exterior physical world.

Gert Germeraad's exhibition "Home Sweet Home" mirrors these questions in an interesting way, not least in his latest work "From the Series on Racial Biology". The series takes its starting point in the Swedish history of racial biology, through a study of the Institute of Racial Biology in Uppsala. Racial biology was a science that developed around the turn of the last century as a way to divide and evaluate humanity in accordance with "racial belonging". According to some of the leading scientists within the field at the time, the Germanic ethnic group, the so-called Aryans, were a leading master race with the assignment to rule the world. Put into practice these theories created what was called "racial hygiene", which purported that it was desirable and possible to refine and preserve the ethnic group by different methods. One such method was to prevent certain individuals from having children with one another based on race, kinship or level of intelligence. This outlook lay the foundation for the establishment of special sterilization programs, where in Sweden alone, over 60 000 people were sterilized against their will during a forty-year period.

The Institute for Racial Biology in Uppsala was formed in 1921 by the government, after decision passed in parliament. Herman Lundborg, Associate Professor of Psychiatry and Neurology at Uppsala University, became its first director. During the first years of the Institute's operation,

over 100 000 Swedes were measured and examined. Alongside each individual was noted information about family background, social status, body length, shoulder width, pelvis width, nose length, eye color, beard, pubic hair, etc. The survey resulted in the work "Svensk Raskunskap" ("The Racial Characters of the Swedish Nation"), published in 1927 in 11 000 copies.

Gert Germeraad has studied the photographic archive of the Institute of Racial Biology. The archive consists of thousands of black-and-white photographs of people who have been placed before the camera and documented. The photographs have been taken in a social-realistic fashion and clearly convey information about the class, social status and gender of the people portrayed. From this extensive material Germeraad has selected a number of images of people who in one way or another have spoken to him. It may be that they have reminded him of someone he knows or has met, or that he in some other way has felt a connection with them. Using these images as his starting point, Germeraad has sculpted the portrait of a number of individuals. It is a strong act that the artist performs, to lift these individuals from their obscure and anonymous existence in the archives of the Institute of Racial Biology, in order to sculpt their portrait and in this way restore their identity. With his act, he breaks the determinism which the categorization within the archive has imposed upon them. A determinism, which has caused them to lose their own identity and instead come to exist to exemplify a type. A type which subsequently has become evaluated and placed within a hierarchy.

Through an act of sculpting in clay, Germeraad gives shape to a number of the anonymous individuals from the archive, almost like a form of reincarnation. He lets the imaginary person take form and once again take up space in the physical room. It is a re-creation mediated by the artist, in that way both a portrayal of the historical individual it portrays, as well as of the artist himself.

The sculpture of clay is like a vessel, like a shell, just like the human body can be seen as a vessel for the soul. Clay comes from the earth as does the human body "From dust to dust". The human body is impermanent and transient in its constitution. It is programmed to age and eventually to have served its time and die. Matter is not constant. This is a physical law. Life and time leaves its mark on matter, which eventually dissolves, to later be re-created in an eternal cycle of rebirth. This stands in contrast to the soul, the interior of human beings, which is seen as permanent and consisting of something other than matter. Something which could best be likened to light.

Gert Germeraad's sculptures are painted with watercolour. They are not glazed. One could perhaps say that they can breathe. Their eyes are

noticeably strong. They seek mine in a direct gaze. A gaze that creates meeting and a sense of presence. This is a far distance from the state of objectification which characterized their existence within the archives of the Institute of Racial Biology. Here the artist has succeeded beautifully in creating portraits of the individual in her own right. Free from having to serve any other purpose than to exist as they are. In this way these portraits also touch on more existential questions apart from being portraits of individually selected persons. The way in which they are sculpted as portraits, with great perfection and compassion, as well as the context from which they have been collected contribute to bringing forward this aspect of the work. It's about showing respect and reverence for life and discovering the divine and unique in every person and letting it bloom. Rather than the perspective, sported by the scientific tyranny of categorization and objectification, where a person is judged and marked by her exterior. Something that creates suffering and bondage, which can be noted in the portraits sculpted by the artist.

Some of the sculptures/busts in this series are presented on stands covered with cloths. These cloths are connected with embroidered tapestries displaying proverbs such as "Home Sweet Home", "Sweden, Sweden motherland, home of longing, our home on earth", "Look forwards not backwards", etc. Proverbs which reflect the idea of the nation, the welfare state. Swedish national identity, with the home as its strongest base, is portrayed as a safe and secure sphere, which functions as a bastion against all that which is foreign. The embroidered tapestries, which at first glance may seem harmless, receive through their contextualization with the sculptures a different edge which creates a much more disquieting feeling. It feels loaded to place the portraits of individuals from the archive of the Institute of Racial Biology straight into the context of the home and allow them to bear witness there. Racial biology's ideology is closely connected to a kind of paranoid defense of the home as a symbol and bastion for the nation. The pure and genuine, which at all costs, need to be defended against any form of imagined pollution. Who belongs and who is rejected. The image of the perfect Swede – the most Swedish of the Swedish still survives today.

All oppression begins with separation. To make another person into the other and in this way separate her from oneself, makes it possible to apply another scale of values to this person than the one saved for oneself: higher-lower, better-worse, black-white, rich-poor. Our world is saturated with this perception of separation, which leads to war and suffering. To know the other is to know yourself. That which is in one is in the whole. This is a mystical truth. Separation is an illusion created by the ego.

Today we see a rise in fundamentalism all around the world. This is an expression of fear of change. In the globalized world separation between

nations is dissolving more and more. The development of our communication systems and our altogether increasingly interconnected world, through transport, travel, trade, exchange, etc., makes an event taking place in one end of the world have almost instantaneous impact in other parts of the world. Something which in a most tangible way exemplifies how we are getting more and more connected even in the physical material dimension. Yet another pointer at how we simply cannot keep pretending that we are separate and isolated from each other.

The word redemption forms strongly in my mind. Redemption from all kind of oppression and objectification, which serve to belittle, harm or reject someone from the social community. Here the artist shows great compassion with his sculptures. It's as if he can identify himself with the oppression and expulsion that they have suffered. Germeraad restores the anonymous individuals from the archive to the freedom to exist on their own terms and as such creates a symbolic re-surrection. Through his intervention we are given the opportunity to meet them in their own right, at the same time as he creates a shape for the spectrum of problems that the archive bears witness to. He creates a form of active resistance by providing an alternative story. It is when we meet an individual without categorization and other labels that we are able to see the individual in her own right and also recognize her equal value. To bear witness, as I feel the artist does, is a form of healing. To open the closed room in order to enable another reading. The personal and more political are woven together.

That it is the personal that speaks through the more universal can be experienced through the artists metaphorical self-portraits as well as abstract charcoal drawings that are presented as part of the exhibition. The sculpture "A Portrait of the Artist As an Old Man" is placed at the entrance to the exhibition almost as a guard or host. It is as if the stories and testimonies pour forward through him. As if it is he who guides us through the exhibition. He is large, larger than life, sculpted as a whole body rather than a bust or a head. He stands bent lightly forward almost hovering over us. He looks tired, contained within himself, as if tired of the situation. A bit further into the exhibition we encounter the small sculpture group "Home Sweet Home". Here the cartoon character Wile E. Coyote is in the process of trying to blow up the ideal image of house, home and family. A work which along with other works points at a wish for regeneration and to be free from oppressive structures. Last but not least, a sculpture from the series "Ecce Homo", "Self-portrait-Battered" is presented, which makes a strong impression on me. Here the damage is clearly displayed on the outside rather than on the inside. The sculpture has received clear blows to the head and face. It has become distorted and partly destroyed. It displays physical damage at the same time as it also destroys the artistically perfected realistic work of art. As if the artwork on a symbolic level has reached its limit, served its purpose, when it comes to what it is able to

relate with this form, of the depth of the interior world.

What than could another form of image-making of the ephemeral interior world look like? What expression can a state of mind or emotion take? Gert Germeraad's large abstract charcoal drawings with their almost free-floating cloud-like fields of black which merge into white to return and almost become engulfed by black feels like an important example in this direction.

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