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Katja Davar
Dinner with a Hostage
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Discussion with Katja Davar about the exhibition Dinner with a Hostage

Your work is constantly influenced by the technological achievements of our society, yet you translate the rational analysis of each subject in very poetic, partly even romantic works. How do you choose these themes and on which aspects do you place a particular value?

I find things that interest me from books and newspapers, from historical science magazines and television documentaries. The ideas often relate directly to the implementation of technology in society on a contemporary level but in the foreground it's not the physical 'correctness' of a theme that interests me, it's more the visual representation of a subject as it's portrayed in diagrams and other graphic forms. It's only during a period of looking at the visualisation of idea that I start to associate the relationship between for example technology and society, not the other way around. I'm often fascinated by a negative effect that technology can have, an effect that is suppressed by society because that doesn't sell as well as success stories. No one really talks about the immense amount of space junk that sails around in orbit presenting a huge danger because that's just a waste product of another era for which no one really feels responsible. Things like this interest me. Things that are quiet, hidden but represent a metaphor for power-political structures. Also for this reason economic graphs are a huge source of inspiration in my work.

Interestingly, your works move between canvas, drawing, watercolours, embroidery and 3D animation. Which of your earlier works is particularly important for you and what importance does drawing have in your work?

A milestone for me was the attempt to make a computer game in 1997/8 where I tried to weave together a form of artificial intelligence and pencil drawings in a multi-layered adventure game with an autobiographical character. The result was a complete mess but I learned a tremendous amount about the parameters and limitations of my own work and also about my ability to work with other people (programmers, designers etc.) I like the idea of working on my own and ultimately by giving up the game idea I freed myself from having to compromise. I still wanted the ideas that had gone into the planning to materialise and I think that this was the point where I really began to play about with different media and where the "waste product" suddenly became really interesting.

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Drawing fluctuates in its importance in my work. I don't use it as a pre-amble to a 'larger' piece of work in that classical sketching sense, for me it's more like a monochrome picture that just happens to be made in lead pencil, smudges, is difficult to store, restore and so on.

The exhibition in Karlsruhe, "Dinner with a Hostage", consists exclusively of large format drawings realised in the form of a tondo. What is the series about and which role does the form of the drawings play?

The series is inspired by clouds and cloud paintings, by cupolas and angel-less ceilings, by spectacular disasters and accidents and by the intimate distinction between human failure and human intention. "Dinner with a hostage" started with a drawing of the Piper Alpha oilrig explosion in 1988, in the North Sea of the coast of Scotland. In the drawing, which consists mainly of clouds of smoke, the only key is a tiny part of the rig that is reflected in the water. Other than this it is an unstable formation with no definite outline or colour yet it possesses the power of a material in which any kind of figure may appear and then vanish. Two other drawings from the series portray burning oilfields in the middle and Far East, technological and ecological near disasters depending on which news agency you believe. The fourth drawing in the series is an allegory of the "Organisation of Petroleum Exporting Countries", otherwise known as OPEC, and their relationship to difficult oil-buying clients. So the series is based around oil in some form and the shape of the tondo serves to enhance the documentary aspect of the subject matter, whilst simultaneously propelling the work into a different era. One thinks of 19th century prints or the form of "vertical" paintings in the Renaissance, or simply a periscope from a trench or submarine. The drawings could belong to the future or the past but their common denominator is the interdependence of the economy, politics and technology.

Katja Davar was born 1968 in London; she studied at Central Saint Martins School of Art in London, at the Academy of Fine Arts in Düsseldorf and the Academy of Media Arts in Cologne; solo- and group exhibitions took place p.e. at Bonner Kunstverein and Kunsthalle Düsseldorf; Till the 16th May Katja Davar participates in the Videonale 10, Kunstmuseum Bonn, Germany