

Philipp von Rosen Galerie

MARKUS HUEMER
A NEW KIND OF TRUTH

In his book, *I Can Hypnotize! What Can You Do?*, 2007, Markus Huemer defines himself as a “media-based mannerist,” referring to the artistic movement of the Late Renaissance, when, in a way, artists perhaps became liberated for the first time—from pre-established rules of composition, harmony, and proportion. The main point of the Renaissance movement was a new understanding of the world, the enlightening of the human mind, and physical beauty. Mannerism, as an evolution of the latter, subverted all this and focused neither on reality nor on the ideal of beauty, but rather on the artist himself as a creator, on the concept of geniality.

As Huemer explained in *I Can Hypnotize! What Can You Do?*: “Since there is no unified Mannerist doctrine, individual variants are part of the definition of historical Mannerism as a concept. In the sixteenth century, artists ‘copying’ other paintings developed a special handwriting of their own—*una maniera*. They used striking deviations in their copies to articulate to the highest possible degree their own originality, the unique and advanced nature of their personal input. As well as copying the virtuosity of the grand masters, Mannerism also publicly established the artist’s personal, individual stamp, and a marked increase in artificiality developed, to the point of outright exaggeration. In ‘media-based mannerism,’ distortion, exaggerations, radicalizations, individual twists, quotations, and repetitions feature, as does the supercharging and destruction of formal concepts that pre-existed in painting. ‘Media-based mannerism’ is consequently less a style and more a figure of reflection, an appropriation of traditions, and at the same time an anticipation of new constructions”.

One additional thought should be touched upon with regard to the concept of “media-based mannerism,” which combines what at first glance can be understood as contradictory ideas, with “media” referred to new, emerging art and “mannerism” referring to classical art, in this case primarily painting. In Huemer’s oeuvre, however, the relation between the paintings and the media works can be described as correlative, since there is no distinction between real, virtual, and painted worlds. In most cases, the focus is in fact on the internal reality of computers, the Internet, computer programs, and projection equipment, how the computer codes, and algorithms function in this parallel world, which is so close to us but cannot be seen and cannot be depicted. Huemer uses the deformation common to Mannerism to examine image production in order to create something that appears to be true and recognizable; at the same time, however, it is not difficult—if we look closer—to discover that almost everything is deceptive. This confrontation, not devoid of self-irony, is what constitutes Huemer’s *maniera*: nothing other than looking for the truth, getting to the bottom of the structures, concepts, and myths of artworks.

The search itself is the goal, since, from the very beginning, it is clear that this search is actually condemned to never reach its goal. This basic disappointment—the search for something that is ultimately impossible, being aware of this from the very beginning and dealing with it more with humor than with desperation—is always visible in Huemer’s work and creates a very special tension with regard to the technical perfection of his production.

In line with Huemer’s discourse, the statement that lends the exhibition its title, *This Exhibition Has a Utopian Superfluity*, follows Ernst Bloch’s concept of utopia, which is posed not as the *opposite* of reality, but rather as a *result* of reality or, in other words, a new kind of truth in the age of science and technology.

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Bloch formulated the doctrine of “cultural surplus” to define the role of culture and, as part of this culture, also the role of art and painting, in the construction of human utopias as reflections of humanity’s desire for perfection. Huemer translates these philosophical references in a conceptual sense using his *maniera*: deviating and manipulating the original wording by using a synonym that changes the meaning only slightly but indeed profoundly. With a large dose of cynicism, Huemer uses the word “superfluity” instead of Bloch’s “surplus”; and suddenly the whole approach is charged with a new connotation which opens a different field of discussion deeply related to the art market system, the position of the artist, and the clichés of how contemporary art is perceived by society.

According to Bloch, such utopian surplus has no negative connotations, no sense of error, no illusory hope; in fact, it is full of anticipation and the power of transformation. In his work, Huemer constantly circles around this idea of anticipation; by using the subversive noun “superfluity” to describe his own exhibition, he makes us feel unsure, as though we had perhaps been guided to the wrong track by the simple idea of obliging us to think and look twice.

The formulation of the title suggests a kind of frustration of expectations, the shadow of a potential failure, the doubt of not being able to validate what is to be considered right or successful, questioning the idea of geniality and what would be a valid formulation to depict the truth.

Nevertheless, as if all the aforementioned layers were not enough, when confronted with the exhibition, we do not see superfluity of any kind: We find extremely flat, large-format paintings depicting trees and forests in strong contrast with paintings reduced to very laborious miniatures, which function as a kind of fake digital archive of preexisting artworks, as well as completely closed wooden boxes, and a large series of portraits of the far side of the moon. Everything strictly reduced to black, white, and gray, occasionally revealing the bare canvas or the wooden image support. In fact, the conceptually extreme reduction of the exhibition and how it is displayed in the museum space does not allow for any temptation of superfluity.

Although Huemer generally derives his motifs from nature—the most obvious reality—what he constructs with his paintings is not an imitation of nature. Reflecting on his role as an artist, he formulates a different reality, a new truth, completely artificial and calculated by a computer, free of any kind of veracity and only suggested. Instead of providing us with an image, we are given more or less abstract forms, planes of color that can be interpreted as trees, plants, or architectural motifs, depending on the distance, real and cognitive, that we are able to gain. The paintings, even those in oil, appear to be artificially created, even printed. Underlining the idea of a lack of emotion, Huemer questions the validity of the assumed principle that art *must* be emotional. We can conclude that, in Huemer’s work, no guidance, readability, or clue for meaning is given, no rest allowed.

Through his work, Huemer confronts us and himself with the dissolution of the idea of artistic genius, the impossibility to depict the truth, the frustration of expectations, and the deception of cognitive faculties with the help of a certain distance and irony, but also with the endeavors of a convinced utopian.

Vincent Polakovič