

At Arm's Length

*Painting is the making of an analogy for something non-visual and incomprehensible,
giving it form and bringing it within reach.
Gerhard Richter, Notes, 1981*

By Irmgard Berner

How intimate can remoteness, can distance be? How ordinary can a movement be, suspended in one moment, and yet so boundlessly mysterious? Anne Hoenig's paintings "At Arm's Length" immerse us in a series of eighteen women's portraits that radiate and embody precisely this allure, this enigma. The protagonists are predominantly shown in back views, positioned in pictorial spaces that remain ambiguous. Their settings are disquieting, but at the same time of great, almost seductive sensuality. For viewers, the search for meaning begins when they attempt to trace the possible gaze of the averted eyes, seeking to fathom an overarching narrative that cannot be found. Their own inner, experiential constitution begins to interweave with what is perceived in the image, what they seem to know and recognize, yet which ultimately eludes knowledge, what tantalizes the gaze and touches the emotions, be it the woman, the place or the suspended intimate instant in the moment of contemplation.

Anne Hoenig's paintings operate as emotional generators. In the viewer, they set into motion a highly complex neuronal process based on the dynamics of memory and the images stored within it. Their fascination arises from the "mechanics of perception", as Hoenig describes the process. Today's cultural transformation turns communication into content, with social media creating the dream of grand networks. Deluged with information, we imagine that we know the others. "But noise does not equal truth. And so we wonder constantly about misunderstanding."¹ In her paintings, Anne Hoenig counters this noise with a great stillness, the stillness of the suspended moment, and poses the question: Why are they turning their backs to us? Because everything that is visible has something to hide, and because we want to know what is hidden? She herself seeks to understand what is. To do so, she creates analogies. At the same time, she avoids any specific aesthetic that might act as an obstacle to the viewer. The body turning away and the back turning towards us underlines in one grand but simple gesture the disjunction between the notion of being in the know and the reality that we know so little.

Painting has a long history of nudes seen from behind, but in contrast to these nudes as rendered by Renoir or Velasquez, Hoenig does not make the viewer into an intruder. She intends her paintings to provoke reactions; in a literal sense the viewer is supposed to feel them physically, to react to them. Here a central role is played by the human imagination, the capacity to create images in the process of perception. This influences the emotions felt when contemplating the picture, individualizing and radicalizing them. For depending on what is imprinted in the memory and stored unforgotten, new synapses form; in a sense the

¹ Hoenig, Anne: Notes to "At Arm's Length" 2013

images manipulate themselves, adding some things, but also making many omissions. A mental image can be grasped either in the realistic sense as a reflection of reality or in the idealistic sense as a construct arising from a spontaneous activity of the mind. Hoenig's paintings evoke spontaneous emotion, feelings that lurk deep within, emerging from the gut. This *endogenous visuality* can make the body into the location of the images, as the image anthropologist Hans Belting² describes it. Hoenig intends these emotions to open the door to the meaning of the picture and put viewers on a path on which they can pursue their own, highly individual correlations and creations of meaning.

Anne Hoenig conveys emotions through the eloquence of the gestures. The poses have been arrested in the midst of a performance, a movement; they are fragmented into time, place and body. The individual images do not adhere to a plot, an overriding narrative; they stand alone, independent. Though they raise questions, they do not offer a correct, valid answer, nor do they depict an absolute subject. Anne Hoenig wants the idiom "at arm's length", which provides the title of the exhibition, to be understood as a phenomenon of distance, a metaphor which in very intimate and emotional fashion allows the viewer to contemplate distance as such in its universal nature, and to reflect upon the intellectual act of appropriation. The other, the counterpart, exists through interaction: "Everyone is the other. This is a part of experience that we rarely confront."³

At the same time, the picture detail, the peculiar incompleteness of the motif, leaves many things open, setting up a broad scope for interpretation. Hoenig creates analogies through representation, flouting all narrative gestures; what counts is the snapshot, the state of being in the image. The detailed views, excerpted from a progression, a greater whole. In that, the concept of identity on which her work is based is comparable to Jean Baudrillard's⁴ idea of the *fractal subject*, which displays key characteristics of *fractal objects*: "It is ... characteristic of the fractal object to be contained entirely in its minutest details". In Hoenig's work this can equally well be a shoe, a hand, or a pearl necklace around the neck of the woman being touched. Whereas for Baudrillard the video screen is the projection surface, with respect to Hoenig his idea of the *fractal subject* can be applied to the canvas, the textile that is canvas and the medium that is used in oil paintings to produce them serially in the technique of the Old Masters.

The elaborate execution of the paintings heightens the impression of the universal nature of the fractal. But for Hoenig it is chiefly the expression of a universally legible language. Her painting technique manifests attention to detail in its many layers of paint and long, meticulous work processes. These compositions, placed on the canvas with precision, admit of no sketch-like quality. Hoenig leaves nothing to chance; everything seems under control. That is the paradox of her art. She uses light and shadows to create strong contrasts and models the surfaces of the bodies like a sculptor; muscles and sinews vibrate tangibly beneath this surface, the anatomy stands out beneath the skin. In baroque and classical *chiaroscuro*, soft bodily contours often acquire the hardness of furrows and channels over which the skin tautens waxily. Vagueness and enigma emerges not due to unresolved areas or sketched-in gaps in the composition, but through the model's turned-away pose in the

² Belting, Hans: (2001) Bild-Anthropologie. Entwürfe für eine Bildwissenschaft, München: Fink

³ Hoenig, Anne: Notes to "At Arm's Length" 2013

⁴ Baudrillard, Jean (1989): Videowelt und fraktales Subjekt, in: Ars Electronica (Hg.), Jean Baudrillard, m. a. Philosophien der neuen Technologie, Berlin: Merve, S. 113-131.

artificial glow of a room's atmosphere, or in the twilight of an alien, surreal landscape, which in turn stands in contradiction to the figure and thus heightens the tension.

In several of the pictures, Hoenig uses bare skin as a key secondary motif. In the painting "At Arm's Length", however, she leaves the enigmatic beauty fully clothed, i.e. covered. The woman shrugs off her jacket in a liberating gesture, gazing into the distance. The long chestnut hair falls down her neck, slipping into the collar of her blouse and vanishing over her shoulder to her front, while several stray locks meander across her back. Her face is averted, with no part visible to the viewer. The woman fills the image down to the waist. A snapshot, free and self-sufficient. The woman's stance, her bearing, the act of pausing in this moment expresses an inner composure, an emotion of the moment. Anne Hoenig immerses the scene in a cool twilight, surrounding the woman, the bare forest and the lead-grey tree trunks in the background in a dusky glow. The pale blouse captures the central light, separated by a sharp, dark angle of shadow from the shimmering, patterned jacket. The jacket fans out in the dynamic movement; the clothing seems to pause in motion just as does the woman, its folds frozen to angles and grooves.

It recalls historical images, costumes, fashions and mantles as seen in works by early Renaissance masters, or by Dürer, where the arrangement of the folds is a key element of expression and representation. Here, too, Hoenig creates representations through analogies. She leaves overlong silk cuffs jutting out from the sleeves and over the hands, a gesture that seems both courtly and casual in its desultory negligence. This distinguishes the painting from others, as hands, fingers and their expressive gestures, with a wealth of contours in the harsh play of light and shadow, often form the focus of Hoenig's compositions. Here the focus is on the texture of the silk blouse; the velvety, ribbed surface of the coat catches the light only subtly at the edge of the folds. This oscillation not only lends the painting the aura of the Old Masters that marks Hoenig's entire oeuvre, it also gives it the nimbus of a staged appearance, heightened still more by the pose of a sudden pause. These two aspects exemplify both this series and the earlier series "Time Slice" and "Hard Boiled Painting".

It seems immaterial whether the figures are filled out with colors or whether they seem drained of color, appearing in black and white as though from a different time, like revenants drained of their vitality, but still possessing power. The woman in "Back Seat" rears up, while in "Arm in Arm" she lies by herself on the pale, wrinkled sheet. The painting "Lateral Motion" from the series "Hard Boiled Painting" should be mentioned as well. Here, too, the performative gesture makes a striking appearance. A woman lies stretched out, half rising from the dark cold ground in a violent movement as though to twist away from the viewer. Here Hoenig pays homage in passing to the Swiss painter Balthus. In close-ups from an oblique perspective or in frontal views, the gestures and moments of motion generate emotions in the viewer. The influence of Pop Art and Hollywood films is reflected in the glossy surfaces, as in "Up in Arms", and points to Hoenig's years in Hollywood, where she worked as a film editor until her mid-twenties.

Anne Hoenig has chosen a highly time-consuming working technique. She paints about twelve pictures each year, working on all of them simultaneously, developing her motifs in a multi-phase process. She begins with drawings in which she captures the dynamic aspect of the movement. Then she seeks out her models accordingly and stages the poses in photo shootings based on these initial sketches. The backgrounds are all determined later. In

further phases of the working process, the photos serve to prompt her memory, assuring her of how light falls on a fingernail or how a hem casts its shadow. In her studio she moves from one painting to the next, meticulously determining its structure and applying layers of paint one by one. She often underlays the flesh tones with a green that shimmers as bluish veins through the yellowish, flesh-colored layer that is applied later on. With subsequent layers of paints she achieves optical effects and places the brilliant highlights that lend her paintings an inner radiance and richness. During the painting process, she devotes an extended working phase exclusively to the clothing. The last layers of intricate glazes accentuate the three-dimensionality, increasing our sense of depth and light. The drying process of the paints dictates the flow of time.

It is part of her concept of painting, indeed her obsession and passion, to pursue the Old Masters' technique of layered painting with the means available today. To achieve the extraordinary brilliance of her colors, Hoenig uses special, sumptuous pigments and oil paints produced according to historic formulae: lapis lazuli from Afghanistan for a brilliant ultramarine, burnt sienna from Siena in Italy. This shows the value she places on first-class pigments that make possible the dense, richly reflective picture surface.

Nudes viewed from the back, lying or sitting up, a drama fragmented into poses – with all these things, as with the folds of the draperies, Anne Hoenig references classic motifs from art history. But like the technical finesse of her paintings, the lush, saturated surfaces, the fine details and painterly pools of light, they are merely vehicles for evoking deeper, fundamental emotions. The paintings are radiant, auratic and enticing – emotional generators. Images that embody thoughts and feelings, hiding nothing, but invoking a mystery and at the same time the yearning for the truth to remain hidden. What do we see, then? Shimmering, enigmatic paintings that speak from within. Their quality lies in the uncertainty, in an inexplicable mystery. The intimate immensity of the captured moment is the key to this oeuvre. The power of the gesture to evoke emotions and the state of mind that lingers in the intermediary realm of all actions – the place “where we find silence”⁵.

⁵ Hoenig, Anne: Notes to “At Arm’s Length” 2013