

FRANZISKA KLOTZ

At The Edge of Landscape

David Elliott

Franziska Klotz was born in Dresden in 1979, ten years before the end of the GDR. Her father, Siegfried Klotz, was an established painter and professor at the Dresden Academy of Fine Arts. She has made a recent portrait in his memory and remembers well the atmosphere of his studio and work. A pupil of Bernhard Kretzschmar and Gerhard Kettner, he particularly admired the portraits of Edouard Manet and the allegories of Lovis Corinth. Franziska's taste when she was growing up was in the direction of more socially critical work: George Grosz, Otto Dix and Käthe Kollwitz, all well represented in the Dresden Pinakothek.

After she had qualified in classical singing in Dresden in 1995, she took up the new possibility of freely travelling abroad, going at the age of sixteen to study classical singing and piano in Helsingør, Denmark, on a course set up by the Royal School of Music in London. Once she had graduated in 1998, she worked in Berlin on a series of internships in the workshops of the Berliner Ensemble, the Volksbühne and the Staatsoper in preparation for studying Stage and Costume Design at the Dresden Academy; she also became a member of *Grotest Maru*, a newly formed Berlin-based international performance and street theatre group. Although she decided not to develop her interests in music or performance, this early passion has made a lasting mark on her painting. There is a musicality in the way her recent works have become assemblages of notations of colour and show an awareness of the physicality of the body, its limitations as well as its necessity for rhythm and movement.

Heading back home to study in Dresden obviously caused a number of strains. She realised that she was not fully committed to working in theatre design and felt that she wanted to become an artist. Her father was sceptical: 'he was worried that I was not strong enough to handle being alone'¹ but also in the former GDR the possibility of a woman becoming a successful painter or sculptor had been even more limited than in the *Bundesrepublik*. As late as the 1990s, making 'real art', it seemed, was still man's work.

In 2000 she moved back to Berlin and enrolled in the Department of Painting at the Art Academy in Weissensee, choosing in 2005 the one year master class of Werner Liebmann 'mainly because he did not try to influence the direction of my work'.² While still a student many artists made an impression on her. It is not surprising, considering the way she builds up fields of colour in her current work by optically mixing different hues and sensations that appear differently when viewed at close up to at a distance, Claude Monet was particularly important. In contemporary art, Katarina Grosse and Hanns Schimansky, both professors at Weissensee, also had an

¹ Franziska Klotz, conversation with the author in her Berlin studio, 27.02.13.

² *Ibid.*

impact as did the work of young Berlin-based painters such as Daniel Richter and Armin Böhm. Out of more established artists she remembers responding to a wide range of different kinds of work: Martin Kippenberger, Frank Stella, Franz West, David Hockney and Anselm Kiefer. One of her very first works, *Container* 2004, an industrial container that Klotz overpainted in bright yellow, owes a certain debt to the incongruously coloured objects of Franz West, while the clear flat open planes and linear construction of her painting, *Im Visier* [In a Visor] 2005 is reminiscent of the limpid colours and compositions of mid-period Hockney.³ In Kiefer she particularly likes 'the way the material becomes the content of the work and he brings things together through this'.⁴ His search for both beauty and redemption in the forms of a wounded primordial landscape would strike a chord with Klotz's much later work.

Her early years at Weissensee were a time of uncertainty and she could not settle down into a way of working with which she was completely happy. The shadow of her father loomed large and only recently has she realised that it was not until after he passed away in 2004 that she began to find the self confidence to make her first 'real paintings'.⁵

Her early works have a lightness of colour and construction that is in marked contrast to her more recent paintings. She now regards them as 'too fashionable' yet this seems harsh as here she begins to experiment with showing the human figure in different emotional environments while also elaborating a range of approaches to making marks with paint.⁶ Their overall tone though is light and consciously superficial although, at times, the figures seem estranged by the lush optimism of her exuberant brushwork.

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Kommentar: Note for translator Klotz used the word 'modisch'.

It was around this time that she started to use photographs as a basis for her work. These could be either intimate snapshots, 'found' or taken from the news. During 2008 her paintings started to become more dense. She had been using mixed media since 2005, spray paint for some areas and acrylic or perhaps oil for some others but often leaving gaps where the ground would show through. Now paint starts to cover the whole canvas with figures and other telling details picked out in heavy impasto. *Obsession*, 2008, an image of young women dancing, depicts a scene of almost North Korean-like jubilation: smiling faces, rapid movements, waving banners are framed through a blurry foreground of what could be trees (green: top left) or reflections (blue: bottom right) with what appear to be crowds of art loving masses stacked behind them. In a sense this work is a tribute to her own delight in movement and dance, but even more it is about making art itself - mentally and physically.

An unsettling sense of the uncanny pervades many of Klotz's paintings of this time. *Woolly Spider* 2009 could almost be based on a still for a horror film. It shows a

³ *Im Visier*, 2005, mixed media on canvas, 155 x 180 cm.

⁴ See note 1.

⁵ See note 1.

⁶ See *Franziska Klotz* (ex. cat.), Berlin, Galerie Davide di Maggio, 2006.

couple, perhaps a mother and her son, alone in an isolated landscape.⁷ Looking out of the painting, a boy in a red shirt is taking a photograph, a woman in a red dress stares dead ahead, her hand to her mouth. Behind them is a thicket of trees, green, blue and dark brown. We have no idea what they are looking at but suspect that it might be us. What can they see that we can't? An opaque canopy billows over the surface of the dripping trees like a tent or densely woven web. Could this be a clue to what is going on? Unlikely. The suggestion in the title is fake; there is no such thing as a woolly spider (only a woolly spider monkey, a rare Latin American primate, but of these there are no sign). We are left high and dry with a mystery crowned by a sense of unspecified dread.

Early Conversation, 2009 is similarly enigmatic but a little less violent in tone. In an open valley in which several tents are pitched, a stooped elderly woman stands next to a large stag that has turned its heavy antlered head towards her.⁸ The sky that frames this *sacra conversazione* is glowering and dark, yet it could be early morning as part of the horizon is suffused with pink light. Is this a group of survivalists who have cut themselves off from a doomed culture? But I think that we are not meant to be specific about place, time or light. The painting has its own internal logic. This scene could just as easily have been transposed from the beginning of time when man once lived as part of nature.

A constant possibility of threat seems to stalk these paintings. During 2010 Klotz decided that she wanted to remove the human figure from her work, thinking that this absence would be more evocative of desolation and loneliness than any literal depiction. Triggered by photographs of the recent catastrophic earthquake in Haiti, she started making a series of paintings called *Homes*, featuring non-specific destroyed shells of places where people had once lived.⁹ Crushed by nature, these structures perch and slide between sky and land, abandoned and useless tokens of the transience of security, comfort and human effort.

A feeling of unease now starts to pervade her landscapes as she focuses on sites of natural beauty that express what could be also understood as horror or danger. She is now painting from memory and the cliffs, swamps, precipices and crevasses that well out of her imagination avoid the spiritual dialectics of the Romantic Sublime, as expressed in the work, say, of Caspar David Friedrich, because in Klotz's universe there is no unseen healing hand. In such paintings as *Riss* [Crevasse] 2010, *Abgrund* [Precipice] 2010, *Fels* [Rock Face] 2010, *Mire* [2011] and *Sumpf* [Swamp] 2012 we are confronted by projections of ourselves at the edge of landscape through forms of nature that not only imply a knife edge of instability, but also a cyclical process of death and constant renewal that has its own energy but no morality.¹⁰

⁷ *Woolly Spider*, 2009, mixed media on canvas, 210 x 350 cm. Klotz often gives her works English names.

⁸ *Early Conversation* 2009, oil on canvas, 220 x 380 cm.

⁹ The *Homes* series was made in 2010 and 2011. It comprises four large and three small paintings.

¹⁰ *Riss* 2010, oil on canvas, 200 x 250 cm; *Abgrund* 2010, oil on canvas, 80 x 60 cm; *Fels* 2010, acrylic, oil on canvas, 250 x 200 cm; *Mire* 2011, oil on canvas, 170 x 140cm; *Sumpf* 2012, oil on canvas 185 x 210 cm.

During 2011 Klotz started a group of works prompted by the disaster at the Fukushima Power Plant in Japan that followed the meltdown caused by the Great Tohoku Earthquake. Here she combines a consideration of natural and manmade disasters. Based on memories of news footage, these paintings focus on a uniform group of rescue workers who stand alone like sentinels in a bleak snowy landscape. Little colour or detail is shown because the snow, both an expression of and analogy for radio-active fallout, covers everything, rather like the official cover-up of what was actually happening.¹¹

Around this time the motif of the forest had become increasingly important in Klotz's work. She has always travelled widely and gravitated towards wildernesses with forests that she sees as 'sites of remedy and meditation that have special meaning'.¹² Although the forest had appeared before as a partial motif in individual paintings, in her large diptych *Ka'aguy 1 & 2* 2010 it takes centre stage.¹³ Capturing a vast tract of Paraguay's Chaco and Atlantic rain forest from a bird's eye view, she wanted to express both its impenetrability and complexity by showing the way in which a second landscape had been created in the forest canopy far above the ground. Although she has never visited this area, she was prompted to paint it not only because of its combination of physical grandeur and precarious condition owing to human despoliation.¹⁴

Although the canvases of *Ka'aguy 1 & 2* appear to be overwhelmingly green, this is actually far from the case. The diversity of colours used by Klotz in stitching together the textures and depths of this scene reflect the bio-diversity of the forest itself. Whites, violets, magentas, yellows, pinks, blacks, and many gradations in between, all contribute to its shimmering surface. She pushes this range of colours even further in *In the Forest* 2011, where she looks into the sun dappled green wood from the side. In *Farn* [Fern] 2011, the view is similar but the mood has changed.¹⁵ Like a photogravure by Karl Blossfeldt, the shimmering green foliage of a single fern is shown close up in the foreground, set against a softly focussed eco-system of dripping pinks yellows, indigos, blacks and whites that expresses the forest's dark floor and undergrowth. *Kreuzigung* [Crucifixion] 2012, her most recent work of this kind (also made as an etching), is more concerned with the structure of the trees but again this is modulated through colour. The title picks up on the similarity between the shape of the undergrowth and the holy cross, emphasised by the lighting. Inevitably nature here becomes a metaphor for humanity itself, both suffering and causing suffering, creating and destroying.

The large, predominantly white, brown, black, green paintings that Klotz has recently made of the still recovering landscape around Tunguska in Siberia, the site of the catastrophic meteorite impact in 1908, are opposite to the lushness of the

¹¹ *Gap* 2012, oil on canvas, 150 x 120 cm. The Fukushima series of works was made between 2011 and 2012 and comprises ~~xxxxxxxx~~ GIVE NUMBER OF WORKS.

¹² Franziska Klotz, email to the author 18.03.13.

¹³ *Ka'aguy* 2010, oil on canvas, 220 x 720 cm.

¹⁴ See note 7. This work was also made as homage to the work of film director Werner Herzog whose films *Fitzcarraldo* (1982) and *The White Diamond* (2004) depicted this kind of terrain

¹⁵ *In the Forest* 2012, oil on canvas, 210 x 350 cm. *Fern* 2011, oil on canvas, 210 x 185 cm.

primordial tropical forest and in their theme of natural destruction are much closer to *Homes*. *Krater* [Crater] 2013 and *Studie* 2013 focus on the bald rim of the crater, looking rather like a huge oyster mushroom, while *Tunguska* 2013 and *Kreuzigung 2* [Crucifixion 2] 2013 show the fallen rotting trees of the devastated forest.¹⁶ It was estimated that the blast felled about 80 million trees over an area of 2150 square kilometres and their suffering can still be seen.

Increasingly Klotz has concentrated in her paintings on using colour as the main form of composition in order to minimise the considerable impact of the motifs, yet a vestigial narrative inevitably remains.¹⁷ The forests she now paints seem closer to home than before and are populated by anonymous figures, rather like the 'sentinels' in the Fukushima works. Based on hunters, these creatures, dwarfed by a blank wall of closely planted tree trunks, wait at the forest edge as if it were a barrier or border. The forest itself is impenetrable, mysterious, rather like a prison or a camp; now the creatures begin to appear like inmates or guards. Layers of paint cover the charcoal drawing that used to show through to the surface of her works. Previously she would have used a palette knife for impasto, but now she is more inclined to brush or sponge paint onto the canvas, making marks on it with her fingers.

Two recently finished paintings reflect on both hubris and the immeasurable power of nature, themes that have become central subjects of her work. Klotz is acutely aware that what we call 'landscape' is a construct rooted in topographical expressions of region or nation and tries to paint landscapes that do not have this reference. Nature, however, 'red in tooth and claw', has no typicality or region.¹⁸ It is everywhere. *Für Alle* [For All] 2013 marks an act of propitiation: a woman gathers country flowers to place on a simple forest grave dedicated 'to us all'. In *Käthe* 2013, a clothed woman lies dead on the forest floor surrounded by the rampaging undergrowth that will soon consume her body.¹⁹ These paintings show nature at the very edge of landscape, as a primal force that remains oblivious of human desire or thought.

Franziska Klotz once said that 'as a painter you have to be aware of art history.'²⁰ But in her mind these works are not so much scenes of historical grief, death or redemption as seen, for example, in the stark landscapes and woodlands of Anselm Kiefer. Turning their back on the German obsession with history, they are an affirmation of the fragility, beauty and power of creation in the face of the present, as well as of the inalienable truth that, sooner or later, we all have to return to nature.

¹⁶ *Krater* 2013, oil on canvas, 165 x 210 cm; *Studie* 2013, oil on canvas, 43 x 53 cm; *Tunguska* 2013, oil on canvas, 155 x 220 cm; *Kreuzigung 2* 2013, oil on canvas, 200 x 250 cm.

¹⁷ See note 1.

¹⁸ A quotation from Canto 56 of Alfred Lord Tennyson's poem, *In Memoriam* A.H.H (1850).

¹⁹ The figure is based on *Die Vergewaltigung* [The Rape], an etching by Käthe Kollwitz from the *Bauernkrieg* [Peasants' Revolt] series, 1908.

²⁰ See note 1.