

## Stephanie Guse's enigmatic worlds of advertising

A photo series created by Stephanie Guse in the years 2004 to 2006 is entitled promotional chicks. Here the artist poses as a model in various settings: immaculately styled on one occasion, and with minute, yet irritating flaws, such as band-aids or smudged mascara on the next, Stephanie Guse spans the range between elegantly dressed grande dame and extravagantly garish chick. Both, self-confident and autonomous, she stages herself as the artist she is. Autonomous with regard to the photo sessions, which are neither dictated by photographers nor by advertising specialists, and autonomous also in respect to the chosen themes and accessories, which, like the artist's poses, are copied from our materialistic consumer world, only to be parodied with a great sense of humour and irony. Stephanie Guse achieves this effect by using cheap packaging and waste materials for the creation of her head-gear, jewellery and handbags.

The observer of these staged photographs, however, notices this at second glance only and must shamefacedly acknowledge to which extent our perception is influenced and guided by the ever-present advertising machinery with its beguiling promises. Stephanie Guse, who studied graphic design and gained valuable experience in several agencies, is well-acquainted with this world of advertising and questions our perception by penetrating it; not "with a wagging forefinger" in order to reveal our uncritical attitude, but much rather "with a winking eye" (Beatrix Obermoster, Klagenfurt 2008), constantly addressing and showing up her own proneness to seduction and her desire "to be part of something". She quite obviously enjoys the posing, the disguise and the camouflage, while at the same time not being altogether reluctant to our consumer world and familiar with the wish to possess, which Anne Frechen, director of the Künstlerhaus Schloss Wiepersdorf, commented as follows in 2007: "Instead of regretting the fact that she cannot afford luxury items, she creates her own objects of desire ..."; or as Viennese professor Franziska Maderthaner puts it: "It is this playful, tongue-in-cheek attitude, which virtually offers art in replacement of materialism and questions our modern-day demands...".

Stephanie Guse belongs to a different generation than American artist Cindy Sherman, who was born in 1954 and whose theatrical self-stagings exude an atmosphere of latent terror and unfathomable eeriness; Cindy Sherman's photographs are often characterised by elevated narration, lofty extracts from a story which encourage the viewers to make up the missing parts themselves. Stephanie Guse, on the other hand, seems to quite consciously and affirmatively copy the complacent smugness of advertising messages, presenting her photographs in the style of advertisements found in high-gloss fashion magazines.

By keeping to this purely superficial structure without seeming to impair it, she reveals the hidden suggestive powers of advertising messages, which manipulatively promise to fulfil our wishes and desires.

If we are in possession of all the right "musts", as they are termed even in the appropriate German lingo, we can participate in the world of the "beautiful people" and may consider ourselves joyful

“owners” of happiness.

Stephanie Guse, however, also allows the sleek world of advertising to topple: In the photo series *Pathos meets Trash of 2010* the artist shows herself in trashy styling, sporting a tracksuit, baseball cap and a bin liner in her hand. For the sake of self-promotion she places a large-scale poster of this photo in a backlit advertising column, reminiscent of H&M campaigns. This self-ironic unmasking is perfect, even more so, when one considers the background of this shot, which, like all the artist's self-portraits, was taken in self-timer mode: “On the one hand I take up a familiar genre (paparazzi shots) and catch myself in everyday-life situations and poses, such as emptying the rubbish etc., on the other hand my favourite material, “waste”, plays a dominant role in this theme, which is why I chose it as a means of self-promotion for the Vienna “summerstage – open art”-exhibition on the Danube canal. To “tune” my art I used the typographical style characteristic of magazine covers. This enhances the formal aesthetics of the theme and at the same time provides an information medium via which I can make statements about myself as an artist.” (Stephanie Guse)

The artist conveys these messages, including their complete reversals, with nuances of Dada and Pop-Art – a feat she masters with such natural lightness that the viewers might be apt to forget how much artistic and manual skill is actually involved in these stagings.

Whether it is as Empress Sissy, as the pregnant Paula Modersohn-Becker, as a muse from a Klimt or Schiele painting, or indeed as one of the aforementioned promotional girls, Stephanie Guse pays great attention to every detail, her cheap materials are chosen with utmost care and are consistent in context, leading to the artistically convincing results.

Stephanie Guse's work, however, communicates a further message: One does not have to be the typical model beauty in order to have aesthetic appeal. For this is also one of the artist's concerns: In spite of her anti-consumption attitude and her refusal to consider quality materials exclusively as worthy of art, she wants to be aesthetically convincing.