

## **Art of a deceptive beauty**

When, at the end of the 1950's, the first artists in the United Kingdom and the USA began with what would later cause a furore throughout the world as Pop Art, the world of consumption was still in good order. Social prosperity had escalated and produced a society that increasingly wished to see itself reflected in more and more areas of its everyday life. The world of products, media and fashion developed such a dynamic and refinement that artists adopted it, and from then on decisively influenced it. Pop Art made the phenomenon of mass media a theme and itself became a mass phenomenon. What followed was the dissolution of the boundary between high culture and the trivial, a situation that has today become normality.

This connection was so artistically fruitful that Pop Art, which first took on aspects of social criticism in the 1960's, was then as now hardly perceived as a critical artistic direction, but instead at best as ambivalent. Then as now, artists allowed themselves the freedom to recreate and live their fascination with aesthetic abundance, glamour and luxury, and were, against their better judgement, delightedly prepared to accept the auratic exaggeration of everyday objects through advertising, even when they, like Stephanie Guse, caricatured these in the next moment.

Her artistic position would be inconceivable without the achievements of the Pop Artists, and is also characterised by the social movements of the late 1960's and the subsequent "green" consciousness. While it is true that the intellectual proximity with alternative ways of life and criticism of consumer behaviour cannot be overlooked in her work, the artist wisely dispenses with accusations of any kind. Instead she allows the observer to determine for themselves how the promotional orchestration of people and objects in photography, film and glamour magazines directs his/her perception and thoughts.

Stephanie Guse's artistic approach has its starting point in a widely shared sensation: the desire for beautiful, expensive accessories and luxury objects that promise beauty and social status, which, through advertising, become that what we want to see in them.

In the "Boutique" series from 2006/07, luxury accessories such as designer handbags, crystal chandeliers, a fireplace, designer lamps, the typical insignia of a socially privileged existence, present themselves in consciously calculated presentations. They all trigger immediate wishes and appetites, or maledictions and envy. In each case they temporarily blind the observer to what they really are: sculptures made of roughly glued together packaging scraps, objects made of plastic, cardboard or cellophane. Not even the process indicates any particular degree of devotion. The sweet illusion lives only from the staging and one's own expectations. This also pertly diminishes the real model and irreverently and cheerfully divests it of its impressive aura.

Guse is enthusiastic about her materials and recognises the inherent beauty of the elaborately designed inlays of chocolate boxes, the net structure of orange bags or the forms of plastic elements. She is animated by the structure of bubble wrap, the shapes of plastic bottles, colourful ribbons or ads in glossy magazines. She usually starts working without directly knowing what kind of object will result,

and lets herself be guided by colours, shapes, surfaces and design fashions. The production is a game of temporary appropriation, and thus a strategy for dealing with things that one can't have.

The video work "For your eyes only" from 2004 features the artist herself. Her template-like portrait "transforms" itself every few seconds. With only a few stylistic devices, such as colours, shapes, perhaps a pair of glasses or a hair ribbon, nationalities or types are created. She alternately becomes a German, an American, an Indian or a football fan, hippie or lover. In combination with the melodramatic pop song playing in the background, one is quickly tempted to label these. It is first of all the sequence of the transformations that guides the attributions ad absurdum.

The three part photography work "Empresses' Must Haves" carries the exaggeration to extremes through accessories. Here too there is a prototype: Franz Xaver Winterhalter's portrait of the Austrian Empress Elisabeth from 1865. An empress is no longer one distinguished as one by the symbol of a crown, but instead the one who has the right accessories. Also very beautiful are the scraps of text from an advertisement on the left crown!

It is indicative that the artist, instead of practicing consumer criticism, suggests instead a strategy of remaining free and true to oneself despite all pressure to consume. Truly free are only those who, like Stephanie Guse, are satisfied with the paper crown and the costume, because he/she only needs to play with the idea of power.

Stephanie Guse's examination of the pictorial language of advertising graphics and photography is not coincidental. Prior to her study of Fine Arts she completed a programme of study in graphic design and thereby internalised the visual mechanisms of advertising. She later distanced herself from these in order to reflect upon them in her work as an artist. She changed her "handwriting" less than she did the content and made the handwriting the content. This is, for example, the origin of the exhibition catalogue designed by her as a glossy magazine. She balances a lamp object on the thin line between art and design, and even her objects made of packaging trash, in their cursoriness, more resemble drawn sketches than they do thoughtfully composed final products.

Through this work method, which is strongly influenced by graphic design, she also moves in technical terms toward Pop Art. What makes her work so contemporary is how openly and relaxed she deals with the fact that one can't afford something. She confidently offers an alternative, which, because it is art, in turn promises an image-enhancing added value similar to other consumer items. Stephanie Guse also reflects the fact that her works, just like designer handbags, are ultimately commercial products that fend for themselves only poorly without advertisement, such as the accompanying catalogue. Her achievement is her lightness and her optimism. To not take everything so seriously is an unheard of ambition. One can then concentrate on the important things in life and art remains exclusively life-affirming.