

CRUCIFIX & CUDDLY TOY

Catastrophe Domesticated

Once upon a time, ambiguity was a sign of bad communication. Today, it indicates a sense of perspective and irony. Quite a few contemporary artists are no longer interested in clarity, but have turned their attention to the crucial, elusive moment at which one meaning is suddenly eclipsed by another. That twilight zone between two semantic fields, often perceived as opposites, is a complex subject of research, which the surrealists liked to explore in their time. Now, nearly eight decades later, the field of the ambiguous seems to have lost none of its attraction. For the ambivalent no longer implies vagueness, but rather, multi-interpretability, so that it offers a critical alternative to the ostensible univocality of political propaganda, popular culture, and mass communications.

By borrowing images and icons from this dominant discourse and freeing them from their straightforward associations, the artist creates a parallel story of rotating frames of reference and colliding meanings. A large part of the current middle-class discourse is governed by the wellnigh unshakeable image of the stereotypical family. Politicians, advertisers, and entertainers frequently draw from this rich reservoir of happiness, cosiness, and security. Soaps, commercials, and social legislation all rely on this vulnerable cornerstone of society. Even the smallest crack in this cornerstone is an omen of total social disintegration. And these days, the cornerstone is positively cracking up. Dutroux, child porn, and gay marriages: the law-abiding citizen is horrified at all this shaking and crumbling of the safe house. Recent manifestations of reactionary backlash, such as the censoring of offensive works of art, are probably only the precursors of the announced *retour à l'ordre*.

Artists such as Paul McCarthy and Mike Kelly, and, closer to us, Berlinda De Bruyckere, use familiar images and comforting materials in such a way that a yawning chasm opens up, revealing a latent terror. Intimacy becomes suffocation. The home turns out to be hell. “The wife and kids” are revealed as the locus of violence and kitsch. In the works of Loreta Višić too, cosiness gives way to catastrophe. By her seemingly innocent use of friendly and familiar images, she undermines the idyllic lecture of domesticity, childhood, and family. Her destabilisation of the domestic translates itself in highly familiar motifs and/or materials such as the home, the garden, the garment, the cuddly toy, and the crucifix. But this normality is precisely where the terror lurks.

Višić's singular manipulation of her material turns familiarity into alienation. The house balances on the edge of the precipice. Safety becomes horror. This gives Višić's objects and installations a symptom-like quality. The spectator perceives the body, recognises certain symptoms, and perhaps even makes a diagnosis. Subdued tensions and deformations manifest themselves in the material or motif. For instance, the soft back of a teddy bear lying on the floor shows the mark of a child's shoe, i.e., a literal trace of child abuse – this case, not of, but by a child (*Bear, 1999*). A small enclosed garden turns out to be not just a grass plot, but also a grave (*Gravegarden, 1999*). A frayed children's jumper is the raw material of a house, to which it remains connected via a thin woollen umbilical cord (*Untitled, 1999*).

Višić achieves an opposite synthesis of a few of her preoccupations in the site-specific installation *Laundryhouse*, realised in 2000 for the biennial of Louvain-la-Neuve. In this new town, characterised by an artificial small scale and enforced normality, she picked an ultra-idyllic location, in between a recent housing development and a man-made lake. On this site, Višić used hundreds of cast-off garments to build an archetypal house of steel and fabric. But the colourful construction turns out to be haunted. A sudden gust of wind transforms the quite friendly-looking artwork into a cacophony of wildly flapping garments, each item seeming to cry out its individual story. Stories of confusion, repression, flight, and migration. The moving walls of textile open up, reveal the interior, and reduce the building to a ruin. Until the wind dies down and order is reestablished. The ruin has become a house again.

This play of familiarity and deformation, of construction and destruction, of order and chaos, gives Višić's work an ambiguous dynamics of perspectives. This comes to a head in her recent *Crucifix* (2001), which seems to waver between a painting and an installation. This impossibility of classification, together with the nearly perfect technical execution of the drawing and the colouring, make it into a prime example of ambivalence. The comforting déjà-vu of the familiar figure of Christ contrasts with the white abstraction of the cross on the reddish-brown monochrome, and both collide with the disturbing effect of the angle at which the canvas is hung. Art-historical and ideological frames of reference silently rub shoulders here: academism and avant-garde, Mantegna and Malevich, trompe l'oeil and iconoclasm. The hybrid result both irritates and intrigues. A proudly erect tradition on an oblique modernity: it would seem difficult to imagine a more fitting icon for these catastrophic times.

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