

INTERVIEW WITH FELIX HEINRICH

Questions asked by Pia Leydolt

Dec. 2012

What do you consider good art?

An open mind is a prerequisite for appreciating art!

I believe that good art can be recognised by the instant, side- and after-effects it creates for the viewer. For me, the defining notion in this context is that of *experience*. A piece that can take the people that *experience* it out of the moment and lead them on a journey, be it a spiritual or a sensual one, is what I would consider successful art. If this *experience* then creates a lasting impression and validity, it is “top class”. When it comes to art, there is hardly anything more fascinating to me than the fact that it can burn itself into our memory. The longer, the better – I stand by that statement.

What does it take to make good art?

Talent cannot be explained, which makes it one of the most interesting preconditions for creating art. It is the mysterious foundation of all art. When it is complemented by an open mind, initiative, perseverance, diligence and a bit of luck, good things can arise.

Which piece of art has left the most lasting impression on you to this day?

I don't want to judge carelessly and so I would like to pay tribute to Oscar Niemeyer, a true genius, who recently passed away. He was an architect and, in this capacity, one of the most important representatives of modernism. I will never forget the moment and the feeling when I first stepped into one of his buildings, the headquarters of the French Communist Party, during an excursion to Paris. The corridor leading down to the conference room from the entrance and the conference room itself were truly impressive. The special atmosphere of the space and the feeling of awe that has not left me since make this building a piece of art that, for me, falls into the category “most impressive”. All of his buildings are walk-in sculptures. It really is worthwhile visiting and experiencing them!

But I would also like to mention another contemporary artist: through important campaigns, Banksy has helped the hitherto under-appreciated genre of street art gain a standing and develop into one of the most important movements of our time.

How does art contribute to society in your opinion?

Art is always a reflection of the society it is created in. The pool from which artistic work emerges is formed by our personal background, the environment in which we grow up, education, influences and, at the end of the day, every individual's life.

Art is a mirror and thus visionary!

Because of its close inspection and analysis of the "now", art has always been a crucial indicator of the things to come. This is why art plays a vital role in every society.

What does art mean to you?

Art is the spice of life!

But to me, art is also a way to hold on to my thoughts and transport them. This might not always be accomplished in a perfect way, but behind every work of art there is a concept that I try to bring to life to eventually convey a message. Communicating via a medium, beyond of what words can express, that is what art means to me.

Artistic creation exclusively with respect to the "self" is a freedom only art enjoys. At the same time, the danger of walking a lonely path lingers. That is why one has to be careful: egotism or egocentrism have never been good nor served a purpose.

My talent for capturing characters and being able to transport/paint them is absolutely fascinating to me because I am self-taught. If art did not exist, I could not follow this exciting path and would never have the opportunity to find out where it will lead me. Art harbours an experience and a treasure, that is especially fascinating and valuable to me.

An architect by training, you are a late starter as an artist – what made you go into art?

I'd rather say that I have returned to art, even though for me architecture and art cannot be separated. This is why I call my art "Architecture Arts". My art is based on the training and basic skills of an architect.

I would like to elaborate on this point for a moment:

Growing up, I attended a school with a focus on art education and artistic design. Later, during my architecture studies at the Vienna University of Technology, I received an excellent artistic education. I have always been interested in art and technology in equal measure and was lucky to have had outstanding professors. I would like to take this opportunity to thank Christine Hohenbüchler, who always emphasised the importance of a profound art education as an integral part of architecture studies at a university of technology.

In 2009, I found more time to draw because of the financial crisis and a cancelled architecture project. My best friend advised me to get brushes, colours and canvas. His advice to "just give it a try" and the amazing first result rang in the start of the fascination of "Architecture Arts" that I pursue today.

How have you and your life changed due to your artistic activities?

More than anything, the autonomy of artistic work has given me creative freedom. Being able to primarily express myself in art and no longer having to justify my actions according to project requirements and, as mentioned before, being able to follow a path leading to an unknown destination creates a sense of enticing excitement. Knowing I have a passion that I want to pursue for the rest of my life is a challenge that puts everything else I have experienced so far in the shade.

What has been your most absurd experience with the art industry – the press, gallery owners, etc.?

The fact that I was not able to rent a space to exhibit my paintings because they are art, is surely among my most bizarre experiences. And at times I can only shake my head in wonder at the narrow-minded ignorance and egotism of so-called “up-and-coming” fellow artists and curators who consider a degree from an art university a prerequisite for recognising somebody as an artist. When it comes to the press, however, I have only good things to tell so far. A short while ago, I politely asked a well-known gallery owner for a consultation, but he declined. Now, the refusal in itself is not absurd, but the e-mail in which it was expressed somehow was – four sentences without full stops or commas, paying no attention whatsoever to capitalisation. Is that artistic?! To conclude this question, I would like to share two anecdotes I find quite amusing: for one thing, I always have to laugh out loud when I paint the white reflection dots into the eyes in a portrait and the figure suddenly looks back at me as if alive. For another thing, I once looked at one of the leopard spray paintings with the front door open; a cat that came to visit me got quite a – literally hair-raising – scare when it turned the corner. You could call that a bit absurd!

You work with various media – do you have any preferences here?

I can't say that I prefer a certain medium, even though I find the results from painting with a brush simply astonishing. But I also really like spray painting, drawing and 3D-modelling with a powerful computer. In the end, the media I use almost always merge together. It is this variety that makes my work so enjoyable and appealing to me. Acrylic as a material is especially interesting to me from the perspective of its characteristic as being inorganic and as such highly durable.

If you compare the various media – as far as possible – what are the differences?

Every medium has its own character, peculiarities and challenges. I appreciate being able to constantly learn from the respective medium. When I work with the computer, I learn new programming skills, commands and tricks. Also in “conventional” painting with a brush and paint or when I spray, I always discover new things. I never go long without a new aha moment. After all, artistic work is about constantly making decisions and solving problems that arise during the process. Also the difficulty of deciding when a piece is done, no longer meddling with it and contenting oneself with a piece that is still not perfect is always exciting. Because to me, spotting the point

at which further fiddling with the piece of art will impair rather than improve its quality is an art in itself.

Durability and the properties of the output are maybe the greatest differences between the various media. Where computer art is involved, one can apply many tricks and the result is a file that does not last very long: a data CD has a life expectancy of about 25 years. Printouts last a little longer, but that also depends on how they are processed. For this reason, acrylic on canvas is the most honest, effective, contemporary and also most economical medium to me. But it bears the “disadvantage” of requiring an extremely consistent work style without any gross mistakes. Most important and also interesting to me, however, are drawings and sketches, on paper or on the computer, because they lead to results fast and offer a direct path as an addition to language.

Are there parallels to architecture in your work?

I cannot deny my love for architecture. I am convinced that my art is architecture as much as my architecture is art. This is why I refer to it as “Architecture Arts”. I believe it is a fitting name for the kind of art that I make: to me, both disciplines are intertwined and not parallel!

There is always a concept to my work that I follow until a piece has – purportedly – been completed. This is how I currently approach all of my work. Similar to architecture, there is always a draft, a sketch, a plan and a focus on the implementation. During the process, details may be modified, of course. This is clearly exemplified especially by my stencil spray paintings. Stencils and paint are to canvas what pre-cast formwork and concrete are to the greenfield. In my paintings, which I conceptualise to the tiniest detail and which are most demanding to execute, the figures are always embedded in space, creating a space anew in which the figures act.

Architecture Arts!

To me as an architect, the fact that colour fields and their brightness can create space is a fascination in its own right. Admittedly, this is the oldest trick in the book of painting. The spatial depth people see in my works happens almost by itself and I believe that this is related to my background in architecture. One educated to an architectural way of thinking, thinks in three dimensions!

Can you describe your work process in a few sentences – where do you get your ideas, how do you approach their realisation?

Luckily, knock on wood, I have no difficulties finding ideas. I am a creative person trying to go through life with my eyes open. This way, I naturally encounter a multitude of ideas that call to be realised. Every important idea is executed in the way that is adequate for it. Frequently, a collage is the beginning. It is the right means of expression to visualise the concept I developed. When the piece is a painting, the figures are then printed out. This printout, which is traced on the canvas, is the central motif and point of departure for the “image – design in space”. As a next step, this “draft” is coloured. And finally, I raise the contours to achieve the effect I am looking for. If you look at the individual colour fields that make up a picture as layers, they have to be put into a specific order at the end. This is a matter of fine nuances, which are, however, extremely important. Simply put, a colour that is further to the front in space has to overlap the one that is closer to the back. I have never seen an artist who applied this rule more persistently than Magritte. Concerning my motifs, I would like to add that many of my works stem from my “existence” as a political and religious person. At the end of the day, I strive to convey a message

to the beholder in an unobtrusive way. I would be happy if my audience, if so inclined, drew inspiration for further thoughts from my work.

What is your art about? What makes it stand out?

Although I don't want to repeat myself I think what makes my work stand out is the combination of the architectural and artistic training and my personality that developed from this background. Another factor could be that I more or less came to art/ painting being self-taught. Not being influenced by a "master", my technique and the talent I suddenly discovered, the "gift from above", as well as diligence could be the components that make my output unique. Many people point out that my work is very distinctive, which, with all due modesty, might also be a positive characteristic of my art.

What is your next goal?

My next goal is to have an increasing presence beyond the borders of my own country. I also look to have expert talks and consulting meetings with hopefully open-minded conversation partners. Incidentally, I hope to accomplish that with this interview. In the past years, I have worked to create an artistic foundation which I want to build on and which I am now eager to present. In doing so, I intend to proceed with careful deliberation because at the moment, making art is still a bit more important to me than presenting it. Yet I have repeatedly found myself wishing to share my thoughts with an audience. And also selling a piece or two in a satisfactory way, I cannot deny that this is a goal as well.

If you had one wish as an artist, what would that be?

To entertain, fascinate, surprise and sometimes even shake up a few people with my paintings – that would be wonderful.