

# Watch your step! Tiger ahead!

ON 'VISUAL STUMBLING' IN SABINE BOKELBERG'S WORK

After a visit to Sabine Bokelberg's studio I concentrate very carefully on every step down the four stories of the stairwell on my way out, anxious not to fall. Bokelberg told me that missing a step startles the whole body and produces a sensation that remains for the rest of the day. We were actually talking about her paintings, but I know what she meant. The body relies on automated processes that run at the back of our minds and when these routines are interrupted, the well-tuned interplay between conscious and unconscious action becomes temporarily suspended. The background pushes to the fore and for a moment everything falls out of step.

In Sabine Bokelberg's works, it is the gaze of the viewer that stumbles repeatedly. For example when a delicate grid, meticulously applied with a tenuous brush, is traced with the blunt and fast stroke of a spray can, the succession, order and speed of the two actions become counterintuitively twisted and entangled. Disturbances like this interrupt the alleged order of things for a moment – a process that Bokelberg calls 'visual stumbling'.

The annually broadcast New-Years-Eve-sketch Dinner for One comes to my mind and I can vividly picture the old butler circling the table at the fictitious dinner party, repeatedly stumbling over the head of a tiger skin on the floor every time he passes it. Bokelberg doesn't work with the brutal abruptness of an actual clash, but there is a particular humour inherent in her work that makes me think of the situational and very physical comedy of slapstick. Here, too, the precisely composed setting of the stage is brought to life by an action that is choreographed but all the while depends on the spontaneity of a particular moment. Watch your step! Tiger ahead!

Beneath the surface of the pictures things are unsettled. Bokelberg's paintings are made up of multiple layers, which, although repeatedly muted with Gesso, remain active and restless. From among these layers Bokelberg pointedly emphasises elements or lets them disappear in an act of reminiscent anticipation that is not easily located temporally, but floats somewhere between echo and foreboding. She told me that she is fascinated by the faces of pubescents, by the transition that takes place when an expression oscillates between a child already gone and an adult yet to come. This transient state intrinsic to Bokelberg's work is accompanied by the feeling that something has slipped out of position or was never really congruent to begin with. Just as if I had actually fallen on the stairs because the mental image I had made of my body and its environment didn't match reality. Sabine Bokelberg's work draws from this tension that builds up when a gap appears between ill-matched edges.

In her graphic works Sabine Bokelberg uses a generic inkjet printer with scanner function to digitalise material from various sources, allowing them meet on a two dimensional surface. She exhausts all functions of the machine, and sizes, colours, resolutions and arrangements alter organically along the multiple scan and print cycles. These processes don't always occur according to the manufacturer's guidelines, for example when Bokelberg scans with the lid of the machine left open or when she uses near-empty cartridges. Shapes, planes and patterns overlap in these works and they too are about approaching the visual essence of things via an agitation, disruption or gap. This gap not only emerges between the different surfaces but also between observation and comprehension, like the Moebius belt, floating in front of a blurred tinted background in one of the prints, which is plausible to the gaze but deeply confusing to the mind.

When I take the last step – without stumbling – I realise that Sabine Bokelberg's work occasionally makes me feel like a cartoon character following a trace so eagerly that it doesn't notice running off a cliff and into mid-air. In cartoons you fall only when the mind catches up, and you never get hurt.

Marie von Heyl