

Melancholic World Theater

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In the paintings created by this artist, there is no non-committal detachment, no idle toying with form in accordance with the dictum of *l'art pour l'art*. Everything which is displayed upon the canvas is animated by an absoluteness, an imperative with regard to contents which is closely linked to the biography of the painter. Erdogan Bulut who, Kurdish by birth, left Turkey in 1980 at the age of twenty and, driven by a deep longing to paint, completed his studies in 1990 at the Städelschule under the tutelage of Per Kirkeby and Thomas Bayrle, focuses in all his pictures on the theme of homelessness and displacement. From the very beginning of this endeavor, he has avoided all illustrative unambiguity. During the 1990s, we encounter a heavy, material-laden mode of painting within whose dark fields of color, evincing a layered and structured quality, there are embedded mysterious incarnations with a vaguely organic, animal or human appearance. Thomas Bayrle wrote in 1990 about the painting style of his former student: "Erdogan Bulut drives the components of his paintings ever onward – masses are continuously shifted – like concrete moiling within a mixing machine."¹ This is an apposite description of the circling, viscous and whirlpool-like movement with which these paintings weigh, toss and knead their dark and melancholic shapings of paint, thrusting them up onto the pictorial surface only to draw them back into the depths of the picture. In this tectonic nature of the pictures, one senses quite clearly the proximity to Per Kirkeby and his layers of paint applied in imitation of geological structures. With respect to contents, however, it is a matter of something quite different, namely of the translation of a "latent psychological reality"² into an individualized pictorial language touching upon the logic of dreams and the realm of the unreal. On a structural level, this procedure is related to Surrealism and its search for symbolic encoding and for the merging of inner and outer reality. But in addition, this mode of painting – at least up to the end of the 1990s – is characterized by a solidity, an almost terrestrial heaviness and abstractness, which stands in marked contrast to the exalted exaggerations of reality purveyed by classical Surrealism. Bulut's infusion of a psychological element into the event of painting conforms to the logic of a competitive tension and a fragile, constantly endangered reconciliation. Like fragments out of a more extensive context which can no longer be reconstructed, intrinsic forms drift through the mass of colors, collide with each other, and become charged with destructive and self-destructive energy, without thereby causing the picture to rupture. Just as it is possible to clearly recognize the mourning for a world which is breaking apart, to be moved by the experiencing of this work which will never cohere into a whole, so does the painter at the same time pay careful attention to achieving an ultimate compositional balance. In a text written in 1991, he explains: "To pacify the picture until all elements have found their place and not any of them continues to raise questions."³

In 2000, Erdogan Bulut realizes two pictorial installations which consist of hundreds of tiny individual panels and in which a new form is imparted to the ambivalent oscillation between fragmented isolation and the assimilative process which is so characteristic of his works in general. *Gemurmel* (Murmuring) consists of 612 rectangular plaster panels which measure only five-and-a-half by four centimeters, are painted with acrylic, and are presented as a block.

¹ Thomas Bayrle, *Erdogan Bulut: Bilder und Pastelle* (Erdogan Bulut: Pictures and Pastels), catalogue Galerie Bernd Slutzky, Frankfurt am Main 1990, p. 5.

² Hans Zitzko, "Trauer und Ironie" (Grief and Irony), in Erdogan Bulut, *Neue Bilder und Skulpturen* (New Pictures and Sculptures), catalogue Galerie Bernd Slutzky, Frankfurt am Main 1994, p. 4.

³ Erdogan Bulut, "18 Uhr abends" (Six O'Clock in the Evening), in Erdogan Bulut, *Bilder und Skulpturen* (Pictures and Sculptures), catalogue Galerie Bernd Slutzky, Frankfurt am Main 1991, p. 19.

Gebrumme (Buzzing) combines into a large tondo 232 circular discs made of plaster and measuring six centimeters in diameter. The flat pictorial elements – vividly colored, brilliant and almost cheerful in their appearance – present both mystery and familiarity in cozy proximity: heads, sections of landscape and other decodable motifs are situated alongside abstract, biomorphic forms. In the view onto the swarming whole, the individual element disappears into the overall context while also at the same time asserting itself as an independent miniature standing on its own. The focus on the solitary detail and the panoramic perspective onto the whole: in Bulut’s seemingly encyclopedic, quietly humming pictorial murmur, both these points of view are successfully maintained as a dialectical movement in which both the contingency and the degradation of reality are linked to the claim which is laid to unity even while it remains aware of the questionableness of this endeavor. The rectangular tableau *Gemurmel* in particular, with its meticulous, almost minimalist arrangement, appears at a first glance to resemble a visual alphabet, an archive of colored forms, out of which all the visual concepts of the world are capable of being generated. But when, on the other hand, the viewer turns his attention towards the individual pictorial structures, it becomes clear that their vocabulary is in no way derived from systematic criteria, but instead arises out of purely subjective assertions.

It is precisely this ceaseless wrestling with a pictorial form portraying the individual element as isolated and as simultaneously forming part of a larger coherence that is never completed, never restored to its original unity, which also stands at the center of the extensive group of works with which the artist has been occupied since 2001. This permanently growing group of what is at the moment more than thirty approximately same-sized, large-scale canvasses, with its juxtaposition of isolated, individual painterly elements and overall structural ambitions, gives the impression of being a synthesis of the works from the early 1990s and the multipartite tableaux *Gemurmel* and *Gebrumme*. The occurrence which evolves upon what are always landscape-formatted canvases in *Spielplatz* (Playground: the overall title of the series) seems to be complex and mysterious in equal measure. Gathered in an essentially non-hierarchical manner upon the predominantly white backgrounds of the pictures is an extensive ensemble of “actors”: grotesque, slightly squashed or distorted figures, which quote from afar Dubuffet and *l’art brut* (outsider art), appear alongside hooded men, death’s heads and crosses. The motif of the slide for children makes a direct allusion to the term “playground” which provides the title for the overall work complex. Sections of a wall, fences and gates provide architectural accents without making it possible to situate the scene in a specific location. Alongside these objective elements, organic-abstract forms assert their hermetic symbolism. Suffusing these situations is a theatrical element which has lain latent for a good while in the works of Erdogan Bulut. For example, *Arena I* and *Arena II* are the names of two works possessing an upright format and dating from 1998/99, whose titles already emphasize the interconnection between picture and theatrical scene. The term “playground” clearly enhances this aspect. That which these panoramic landscape-formats present to us is nothing less than a *theatrum mundi*, a play whose theme is the inner constitution of the entire world.

Whereas, in the beginning, the painter still attempted to connect and to homogenize the individual elements of his “world theater” by means of monochromatic fields of color, during the course of the work on his extended series he turns more and more towards allowing the individual motifs to hover in isolation or, more precisely, to float in front of the white or, from time to time, also anthracite-gray background. The heavy, baked tectonics of the 1990s have been transformed into the free suspension of modular components. The pictures seem less and less to require an outer, formal support. Sometimes the forms still flow into each other as if by chance, or they are brought into interrelationship by the meandering, feverish lineation. With *Spielplatz No. 10* (2005), however, these stabilizing strategies are dispensed with. The almost exclusively black-and-white painted signs move in front of the bare white of the canvas in utter independence. Only

a chain of hills in the background and the faint traces of a perspectival structure establish a porous hierarchy in the picture, a fragile arrangement of the pictorial plan. But in fact we are situated upon the level of elementary particles. We see the symbolically encoded particles of a world which has already exploded and subsided hopelessly into chaos; we witness the flight of these particles through the pictorial universe, in which there reigns a distinct skepticism as to the possibility of everything returning into meaningful interconnection at some point in the future. Bulut's "journey along the street with an empty sack upon one's back" past "thousands of living beings which are capable of movement"⁴ is a melancholic but in no way hopeless project of remembrance. It is a tattered and piecemeal collection, achieved through painting, of the antagonisms which animate our world. Good and evil, love and hate, symbolic walls and real delimitations play the main roles in this ongoing confrontation. The painter reduces the possibility of pathos already through the pictorial structure. As if from an extremely remote bird's-eye perspective, we look upon the teeming mass which swarms before our eyes in a chaotic manner that repulses all attempts at systematization. We thereby repeat, in a certain sense, the attitude of the painter himself who, like a demiurgic puppeteer, induces his "actors" to appear upon the scene and who, with this theatrical gesture, calls attention to the fundamental constructedness of his painterly project.

Moreover, the pictures remain on their guard against each and every eye-catching unambiguity. The existential homelessness which echoes within them and the heavy-hearted excavation of the buried lines of connection between individual and collective remembrance do not partake in any way of maudlin sentimentality. Instead it is the case that the painter presents us with an entire panorama of possibilities without desiring to compel the picture into a particular asseverative direction. The formula from the Baroque era, according to which the entire world may in fact be regarded as an overwhelming piece of life-theater, offers help in speaking about this existential aspect without subsiding within it. Oscillating between grotesque exaggeration and comical reduction, between drama and idyll, between melancholic isolation and fragmentary solidarity, Erdogan Bulut attains in his paintings an image of the world as theater, as the spectacular portrayal of contradictions which remain irreconcilable and which, for that very reason, retain their inherent vitality.

Translated by George Frederick Takis

⁴ Erdogan Bulut, "Erinnerungsbilder" (Images of Recollection), in Erdogan Bulut, *Getting Image*, catalogue Galerie Bernd Slutzky, Frankfurt am Main 2000, p. 12.