

The Volatilization of the Real

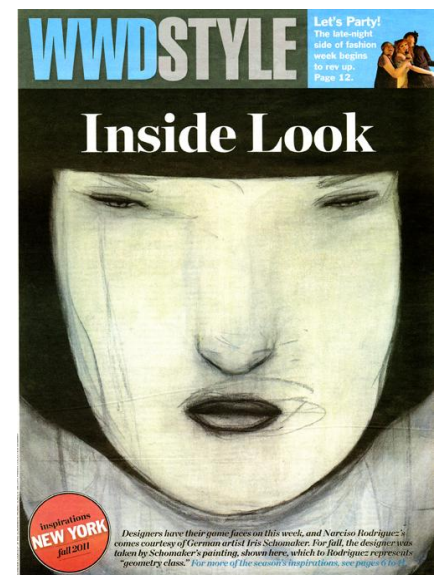
I was occupied with myself, not with reality.
(Friedrich Dürrenmatt)

Iris Schomaker's works usually show a quiet, yet familiar world. They represent nature and the people dwelling in it in an unspectacular way: in the form of waterfalls crashing into the depths, wild horses, winter faces wrapped up in hats and scarves, and snow-covered mountains that rise against backdrops of quiet, black bodies of water. And yet although Schomaker's motifs are thoroughly concrete, the artist does not remain caught in a figurative way of thinking: with the help of figuration, she explores painterly abstraction, and in so doing develops a fascinating new formal language.

In February 2011, the cover of the American magazine *Women's Wear Daily* did not feature a fashion photograph, but something that American fashion designer Narciso Rodriguez had found. He had discovered a drawing by Iris Schomaker from 2008, and enthusiastically praised the “geometrical quality” of the representation.

Considering Rodriguez' fashion creations, his fascination is not surprising: the black and white, graphic seeming contrasts of his collections are echoed in Schomaker's drawing the head of an androgynous seeming figure with a black cloth covering as the framing for the face as well as a white scarf tossed around the figure's neck, which as a horizontal element separates the head from the body. The analogies between the work of the couturier and the artist are not just limited to similar aesthetic interests. Looking at the artistic vision of the two, there is a striking correlation: ultimately, in light of Rodriguez' intention to have the form of a piece of clothing emerge from a fabric's structure and material,¹ it becomes clear that he, just like Iris Schomaker, is interested in having his creations emerge from inner images, and thus divorcing them from models existing in reality. Similarly striking is the dedication of the two creative artists to material and its texture, which means, just like the fact that a piece of clothing only develops by being worn, the images of Schomaker demand that the actual work be witnessed in its real form.

Iris Schomaker does not hide any traces of the process of painting or drawing; instead, she reveals the entire process, in streaks of water that can be seen dripping across the paper at the lower edge, or layers of paint that are superimposed on top of one another in such a way that the palette of colors becomes understandable. Lines from the preliminary drawing that are not erased and thus expose the process of composition before the final application of paint confronts the beholder with a visual solution that initially seems unclear. Rather, they consciously emphasize the



Cover of WWDSTYLE Magazine,
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¹ “What I relate to is the creation of a form from structure and material.” See “Narciso Rodriguez: His Vision,” <http://www.narcisorodriguez.com> (last accessed June 23, 2011)

incomplete, that is, both an element of the end product as well as the traces of the act of painting.

Revealing the searching for and working on the final form makes it possible to recognize the vehemence and intensity with which the artist repeatedly reflects on the palette of her motifs and varies them, and how she becomes engrossed in them again and again. This becomes even clearer if we consider the number of her works that use a similar motif. The waterfalls, birch trees, and concealed faces do not surface in her oeuvre just once, but again and again, forming a motivic series that can repeatedly be interpreted anew. If all the variants are inspected alongside one another, it becomes clear that what is important seems not so much the motif itself, but rather the painterly experience of its creation, even thinking through a formal canon. But the great number of variations might also represent for Iris Schomaker a means of liberation from a clear form. By working on a single motif over and over, she is able to break up its concrete figure and allow for anatomic inconsistencies like overextended torsos and arms or drawn superimpositions that seem to imitate movement.

Over the course of the past two years, this process of disengaging from a concrete visual world, to which she is still strongly oriented, has increased still further. Since 2009, a new central figure has been added to Schomaker's motifs. The motif of the mermaid, the mythical being whose torso ends in a powerful fish tail and thus is outfitted with an animalistic lower body that is abstract in its composition, now takes on an important role in her visual repertoire. And this is all the more notable because in this figure and its characteristic as a mixed being, not only do abstract and figurative body elements collide, but because the mermaid also takes on a mediating role between two opposite poles: human and nymph are not only divided by a water boundary, but also by the fact that the latter has no soul. She lacks the very thing that makes the human being human. And so, according to the myth, she longs for nothing so much as to take on human form, to then become human.

If we look at Schomaker's mermaids, always in the same position, seemingly waiting for something to happen, the adjacency as well as the superimposition of sculptural form and surface composition, but also of concrete motif and hybrid, that is, abstract-concrete bodily structure in these figures, is especially enticing. The visual structure is completed as a virtuosic play with the elements of the image, for while some elements, like the torso surfacing from the water, are only alluded to by their contours, the water surface of the lake, which initially seems to be treated as a black surface, on second glance develops an impressive sculptural power.

And thus it only becomes understandable at second glance why some of the pictures are entitled *Black Pond*: on closer inspection, the black surface of the water reveals itself to be a container of an impressive fish tail which develops in full sculptural quality. What might at first shock our habits of vision is striking in its consequence. For the landscape that surrounds the respective black pond in question is only sometimes alluded to in individual tree trunks, while in most of the images the forest scenery is



Iris Schomaker, *Black Pond III*, 2010, watercolour and oil on paper, 240 x 180 cm / 94.5 x 70.9 in



Iris Schomaker, *Mermaid VI*, 2011, watercolour and oil on paper, 240 x 150 cm / 94.5 x 59 in

only alluded to by a flat, green background, and thus on the one hand picks up the flatness of the water, while on the other hand the sketch-like quality in which the figurative torso of the mermaid is drawn is varied. Against the backdrop of this flatness, the black pond becomes a black hole that draws the gaze of the beholder down into unsuspected depths.

This fusion and balancing of landscape and figure is one of the most elementary innovations in Schomaker's work. While in her 2009 works she still categorically divided landscape and figure, only combining the two as a diptych, the placement of the mermaid in the midst of a forest is something new. But in the case of the mermaids, the forest does not offer a backdrop, but seems to capture the ambiguity of the being vis-à-vis the earthly landscape. While she seeks support on the earth, propped up on the shoreline, with her lower body she has literally grown to become part of the black pond. This opposition between forest and water seems almost irreconcilable in a 2010 mermaid, whose head bears down heavily on the arms and where a merely slight clouding of the lake in the earlier works gives way to a dense, black and almost opaque water. It is now so saturated that its blackness forms a mask-like reflection on her face. She literally seems to have fused with the element, if we consider the spatial extension of the water in the visual composition.

With the help of such visual compositions as well as the hybrid physical form of the mermaid, Schomaker is not only able to combine the two focal points of her artistic work, both her drawings and her paintings, the motif also gives her the opportunity to oppose them in a single image. Consequentially, the water surface also represents an artistic dividing line in the image: after all, it marks both the line where the physical anomaly of the mermaid manifests itself as well as the line dividing the drawn gesture and the flat application of paint. It is an imaginary line, yet one that still emphasizes the oscillating moment between the non-concrete and the figurative depiction. As a vertical line separating the parrot and the human figure, it runs through other works as well, most recently *No Title (Parrot)* from 2010.

It is precisely the rejection of a physiognomy represented here or the scarcely concrete composition of the black fish tail in the water that emphasize in their explicitly abstract mode of representation an essential, artistic concern of Iris Schomaker. When the artist explains that her portraits and landscape paintings are never about concrete individuals or places, but rather “the idea of the mountain, a kind of primal image,”² with the mermaid she is turning to a mytheme with a centuries-old tradition, a primal image that was not only treated by the romantics, but also in modernism, and still today finds use in art, literature, and the media.

Ever since the age of romanticism, Undine—as the mermaid has been named ever since Paracelsus' *Liber de nymphis, sylphis, pygmaeis et salamandris et de caeteris spiritibus*, published posthumously in 1566—



Iris Schomaker, *Mermaid II*, 2010, watercolour and oil on paper, 240 x 185 cm / 94.5 x 72.8 in



Iris Schomaker, *Mermaid V*, 2010, watercolour and oil on paper, 236 x 160 cm / 93 x 63 in



Iris Schomaker, *Untitled (Parrot)*, 2010, watercolour and oil on paper, 120 x 110 cm / 47.2 x 43.3 in

² “Katalytisches Vorgehen: Claus Friede im Gespräch mit Iris Schomaker,” | *Iris Schomaker: Songs of Love and Hate* (Berlin, 2009), 28

has been the most familiar expression of the human longing for a symbiotic fusion with nature or an animate form of nature. If in Paracelsus' natural philosophy the Undine was still part of a collective that lived in water, the Undens, in the romantic period and especially in Friedrich de la Motte Fouqué's *Undine* from 1811, it became an individualized, mythical figure. In Fouqué, the couple man-mermaid embodies the ideal love and harmonic fusion of the opposites man-nature, man and woman as well as rationality and feeling, albeit only possible for a brief time. This still hopeful belief of romanticism in a golden age was radically ended with the onset of modernism. Ingeborg Bachmann, who who treated Fouqué's material in 1961 in a text of her own, now saw Undine as the irreconcilable counterpart to the human community. The spheres water world/human world, this is the quintessence of Undine's dialogical monolog, could not be more opposite. While the world of humanity is shaped by tyranny, betrayal, and vanity, the sphere of water is a free, moving, and speechless world, she explains. Undine's words thus gush forth at the moment when—resulting from the realization of the impossibility of uniting the two worlds—she returns to the water world. Her monolog marks thus the point where, due to the realization, she is denied a place in the human world and thus advances to embody the outsider and the lone figure par excellence.

This representation of Undine as a lone figure, as a figure completely at one with herself, places Schomaker's mermaids in turn in a close relationship to her earlier works, for they were always marked by a reduction to the essential as well as the isolation of a main motif from a usually neutral white or gray background. Schomaker described this concentration as a "different world, which is disturbing in its restfulness and intensity."³

However, it is not just the isolated representation of the mermaid which identifies her as an individual being. In particular the bodily posture in which she persists, with her arms supporting on the shore or with her head placed in them, recalls a state of exclusive self contemplation, as has been described in literature over and over, ennobled as a natural, original and desirable state, and which is still treated regularly today. Ever since Jean Jacques Rousseau in his *Rêveries du Promeneur Solitaire* (1776-1778) praised lonely walks in nature as an ideal state of extreme relaxation as well as the counterpart to reflection, the return to untouched landscape and the loneliness linked to it—as told by Henry David Thoreau in *Walden* (1854) or Jon Krakauer in his 1996 book *Into the Wild*—remains a fascination for civilized man, and the expression of an individual fully concentrated on him or herself.

To return to the notion of the primal image that the artist herself has used to characterize her works, Schomaker's recourse to the mythical figure of the Undine means not only an artistic translation of a memory image rooted in our collective treasury of myths to the language of the present. She makes use of an image that can be considered part of a symbolic and



Iris Schomaker, *Untitled*, 2010, gouache and oil on paper, 30 x 21 cm / 11.75 x 8.25 in

³ Ibid., 23

thus universally understood language. This kind of language has been described by Erich Fromm, whose notions of a symbolic language are very similar C.G.Jung's concept of the symbol, as follows:

Symbolic language is a language in which internal experiences, feelings, and thoughts are expressed as if they were sensual perceptions, events in the external world . . . Symbolic language has a logic in which the dominant categories are not time and space, but intensity and association. It is the only universal language that humanity has ever developed and where for all cultures the course of history is identical. It is, as it were, a language with its own grammar and syntax, which needs to be understood when trying to understand the meaning of myths, fairy tales, and dreams.⁴

Reading this quotation with the awareness that Iris Schomaker's works have a special interest for questions of painterly abstraction, the recourse to a universally understood symbol can be understood as an engagement with the concept of abstraction in painting, which has until now always been ideologically charged. In contrast to the equation of abstract art as a world language that embraced all cultures, dominant since the post-war era, this new interpretation of abstraction as a non-political, but rather archetypal symbolism, thus interiorized in the cultural conscious of humanity, succeeds in replacing the underlying political connotation of the term that was dominant until the 1990s. An attempt at resolution that seems all the more plausible in that Schomaker also tries to fuse the concepts of figuration and abstraction in her painting, which had been separated so rigorously from one another into the twenty first century.

The symbolic horizon of the meaning of the Undine, which always resonates in the figure, is however avoided by the few contemporary artists who have engaged with the subject of the mermaid. Instead, male artists in particular try to distance themselves as far as possible, using the mythical being rather as a symbolic placeholder, with their art pointing beyond it. For example, Stephan Balkenhol in summer 1995 placed a 800 kg mermaid, carved from a tree trunk, in an art space on the summit station of the Zugspitze with the explanation: "No artwork can compete with the overwhelming panorama . . . Actually, human beings have no business being here."⁵

In a similar way, if with far more political ambition, the artist duo Elmgreen & Dragset worked with the sculpture of the Little Mermaid in Copenhagen. When the two artists placed a mirror alongside the city's trademark to mark the Copenhagen Quadriennale, this was intended to visualize the self-centeredness of the Danish government. In both cases the mermaid was not to be taken seriously as a subject, but at best a welcome and familiar symbol that either mutated into an emblem of the superhuman



Stephan Balkenhol, *Meerjungfrau*, 1995, oak wood, 440 cm long / 173 in length

⁴ Erich Fromm, *Märchen, Mythen und Träume. Eine Einführung in das Verständnis einer vergessenen Sprache* (Stuttgart 1980), 14

⁵ "Kunst auf der Zugspitze," *Der Spiegel* (June 26, 1995). See <http://www.spiegel.de/spiegel/print/d-9199815.html>.

beauty of nature, or, in light of its significance as a Danish trademark and tourist attraction, provided an artistic (protest) intervention with the greatest possible public attention.

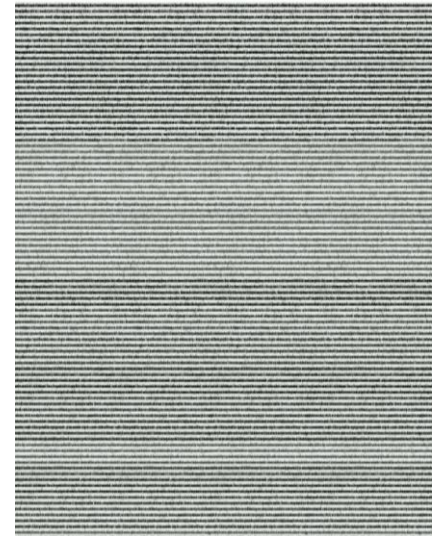
Iris Schomaker, in contrast, is interested in the motif. The mermaid—with everything that adheres to this being—is what she wants: the typical form, the symbolic charge, and the tradition that began with Bachmann's Undine, of using the mermaid as a critical reflective authority. Can—this is Undine's new question—painting and above all art history today overcome the outdated notion of abstraction?

Upon closer inspection of the contemporary art world, we can make out some young artists who work at the threshold between abstract and figurative. One artist who explores the oscillation between the two poles and the questions that result from this in an interesting, although now seemingly exhausted, photographic concept is the young British artist Idris Khan. In his multiple image superimpositions, he uses the cultural treasure that could be called the cultural memory of a western educated individual who is interested in art. Whether it is the gasometer photographs of Bernd and Hilla Becher, the English edition of Roland Barthes' *Camera Lucida*, or Sigmund Freud's text on the uncanny: by the superimposition of scans of all the pages of a book and/or photographs to single image that represents itself as a quivering web of various layers of image, the art creates a seemingly archetypal pictogram that makes visible all the overtones inscribed in it. The result is both form, detail, and amorphous mass.

A different approach to figurative abstraction is shown by the work of the Brazilian video artist Marcellvs L., who translates in a similarly poetic way random situations such as street, harbor, or train station scenes into diffusely cryptic images and visual experiments. Precisely because the artist refuses by and large any camera tracking or editing, he is able to create images that are almost free of narrative echoes and leave a great deal of space for their own modes of viewing. They are impressive testimony of how contemporary art plumbs the question of the reality both of abstraction and its current importance.

All of this is yet of no interest to the world of fashion and advertising. Exploring the myth of undine in this realm, we encounter quickly the Disneyfied *Little Mermaid* image of the happy, beautiful mermaid or experience the mermaid as a beguiling femme fatale. In some cases, the two can be wonderfully combined, as in the Levi Strauss ad for Levi 501s from 1997. Even more visually effective is Uma Thurman presenting Louis Vuitton bags, where her pose and dress suggest a powerful fish tail, creating a fashionable eroticizing image that exudes the esprit with which the customers are to be seduced.

While fashion remains caught up in these clichéd and conventional images, Iris Schomaker with her Undine depictions opens up new perspectives. She thus stands in a small, yet highly interesting tradition of a motif with which until now only literature as well as music have engaged in a radical new way. Since Fontane in his novel *Der Stechlin* created in the figure named Melusine as a modern, intellectual woman refusing



Idris Khan, *The World of Perception*, 2010, lightjet print mounted on aluminum, 178 x 229 cm / 70 x 90 in



Image: Uma Thurman, Campaign: Louis Vuitton, Season: Spring 2005, Photographer: Mert Alas & Marcus Piggott

bourgeois values, Ingeborg Bachmann, Heinz Werner Henze, and Jean Girardoux have followed him in representing her as a counter-image and redemptive figure from social conventions. Iris Schomaker also refuses the clichés of romanticism and uses the legendary figure as a symbol to ignite thinking about the old battle between figuration and abstraction. What Bachmann achieves by way of the figure's monolog, namely to think about language, Schomaker translates in her art: by withdrawing into an obviously artificial world, she creates at the same time an autonomous aesthetic cosmos that offers a forum for discussion about urgent questions of painting. This might seem self-centered for some, but is a blessing for the further development of the genre, especially in light of the newly emergent positioning of younger artists vis-à-vis the difficult legacy of the artistic opposition between abstraction and figuration.

Christina Landbrecht