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Axel Pahlavi

L'ASILE DE LA GRÂCE

08.06.2018–21.07.2018

The four paintings in the exhibition *L'Asile de la Grâce* (The Asylum of Grace) were created over the course of a year. Axel Pahlavi has been living and working in Berlin since 2009; this is his first solo exhibition in his adopted hometown. The series created specifically for this occasion has been hung throughout the gallery so as to form a sequence leading from the small panel titled *Embryon* to the large group composition *Metanoia (Die Verwandlung der Nacht)* (The Transformation of Night) and to *L'Asile de la Grâce*, the painting that lends its name to the exhibition. At the end, visitors come face to face with *Kénose*.

In these paintings, Pahlavi – both as an artist and as a deeply religious person – addresses big, existential questions revolving around the Christian miracle of resurrection. As in previous works, he uses portrait-like representations of close friends and family members. In *Metanoia (Die Verwandlung der Nacht)*, for instance, he portrays his wife Florence Obrecht as the main protagonist, and himself as a devout worshipper holding an illustrated book above his head. The same picture also features the nanny from his childhood days and his son, who can also be seen in *Kénose*. Pahlavi entertains a strong emotional connection to the portrayed persons, who in his paintings become the protagonists of a strange role play. They oscillate between their presence as individuals and their function as actors in the composition, in which different narratives compete with each other. The starting point of Pahlavi's creative process are photographs, which are generally created in his studio and then transferred into the medium of painting by way of montage. Beyond their purely visual reality, Pahlavi's compositions are also interwoven with references to

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historic works of art and generate additional levels of meaning from the 're-enactment' of their respective models.

The exhibition begins with the image of a sleeping clown titled *Embryon*, painted on a copper plate. The character, which appears to be a self-portrait of the artist, lies on an oriental carpet, which can be seen as a reference to Pahlavi's origins. He was born in Tehran in 1975 as a grandson of the then-reigning Iranian Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi. His French grandmother, Christiane Cholewski, had married one of the Shah's brothers in 1960, who adopted her German-born son from her first marriage. This is the father of the artist, who as a consequence has Iranian, French and German roots. After the Pahlavi dynasty was overthrown by the Islamic Revolution in 1979, the family left the country. Axel Pahlavi grew up in Nice. To this day, he would face immediate imprisonment were he to enter the Islamic Republic of Iran. Having learned of his family history at a later age, 'Persia', for him, is an unattainable place of longing, which highlights another connection to the painting: the old Iranian word for paradise originally meant 'circumscribed area' and can here be found again in the motif of the carpet on which the character lies, curled up in the position of a homeless man.

The composition of the large group scene *Metanoia (Die Verwandlung der Nacht)* nods to Rembrandt's *The Anatomy of Dr. Nicolaas Tulp* from 1632, today at the Mauritshuis in The Hague. In Pahlavi's image, the inquisitive amazement of the dignitaries attending a public dissection depicted by the Dutch painting transforms into a multi-layered testimony of a resurrection. In several instances, faith and reason merge – at least that is what the artist intends with his verbal reference to Pope John Paul II's encyclical *Fides et Ratio* (1998) and underlines with the term *metanoia* in the title. In the Catholic context, *metanoia* means penance, but in a literal translation it denotes a reversal of thought. In this sense, the large open book, which in Pahlavi's painting is held over the heads of the group and makes visible both the crucifixion and the empty tomb of

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Jesus, can be seen as a kind of mirroring motif to Rembrandt's work. There too a book is placed in the lower right corner of the image – presumably an anatomical-scientific manual, its content inaccessible to the beholder of the painting. Pahlavi's book, on the other hand, is wide open and lets spectators read these lines: 'Il est revenu à la vie – Il est ressuscité – Il a transformé la nuit en jour' (He has come back to life – He has risen – He has turned night into day). Mention should also be made of the clearly discernible baptismal motifs of light, water and the white cloth handed to the reclining (risen) figure by the kneeling character, which play an important role in the Catholic rite. The baptismal cloth is not merely a sign of purity but represents the actual piece of cloth used by the painter to clean his brushes. Incidentally, the artist insists that his painting should not be linked to the story of the resurrection of Lazarus, as Lazarus returns to our reality, whereas the topos of the resurrection of the dead marks a moment at the end of time before the Last Judgment, after which a new world begins.

The composition and motif of *L'Asile de la Grâce* refer to Antoine Watteau's *Pierrot*, formerly known as *Gilles* from 1718/19, now at the Louvre in Paris. This famous painting, a model for Pablo Picasso and many others, must be interpreted in the context of a (courtly) play: it shows the fool with a melancholy-sad expression from the Italian Commedia dell'arte, standing in a raised position in an outdoor landscape, surrounded by a group of cheering half-figures in costume. Pahlavi's version focuses on the gentle smile of a Catholic clergyman who worked in a French lay order in Berlin for many years. He wears a so-called pullover tunic, as worn for instance by hospital staff. Together with the crucifixion marks on both arms and a so-called small scapular on the waistband, the figure can be seen as a healer or patient alike. He is framed by several, even more unreal scenes, including a Pietà group that includes the artist's mother.

The title of the last painting in the exhibition, *Kénose*, is related to the dogma of the so-called incarnation of Christ. *Kenosis* literally means 'self-emptying' or 'depletion' and, in light of the double

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nature of Christ, denotes his renunciation of divine attributes. Only by accepting his human side was he able to suffer and die on the cross. With regard to believers, *kenosis* denotes the process of total relinquishment and penitent self-humiliation aimed at receiving the divine grace. The motif of Pahlavi's painting harks back to Philippe de Champaigne's *Ex Voto* of 1662, today also at the Louvre in Paris, which is steeped in the tradition of votive paintings and depicts the miracle experienced as a nun by the artist's daughter. In his liberal transposition of the painting into a contemporary context, Pahlavi focuses on the gesture of prayer, which he understands as part of a swimming movement in the sense of a new beginning. The concomitant water symbolism in turn contains a reference to the Christian rite of baptism.

In Pahlavi's works, reality enters into an irritating, startling, enigmatic relationship with the realms of spiritual faith and fiction. Tending towards hyperrealism, his pictorial style lends his characters dignity and authenticity. In the artist's understanding, all these works are a reservoir of his life energy and the feelings he experiences when painting. The time spent working on a given painting is always indicated at the edge of the canvas and thus adjoined to the image together with occasional thoughts and observations. Pahlavi shows us a world that is stubbornly resistant to common contemporary art experiences, which commonly try to elude specific topics or attributions. This artist, however, takes his subject matter very seriously indeed.

Marc Wellmann, May 2018

(Translation from German to English: Patrick Kremer)