

The Narcissism of Re-enactment
by Luc Tuymans

Looking at Andreas Mühe's imagery as a whole, the statuesque is never far away. People-whether in a group or isolated in a vast, overpowering landscape shown together with spotlights or other forms of lighting equipment-remain props. They are frozen and nearly compressed into a pose, presumably portraying honor, posture, and attitude. Always contained, placed within a realm of severe astonishment.

It is this portrayal of the ambiguity of self-esteem that fascinates me the most in this clearly perverted body of work of underlying conventions: a figure in uniform confronted with the larger landscape, the bust-like depiction of a soldier, an SS man, an officer or a civilian, even a totally erased persona, photographed within a non-descript or infinite, emptied-out space, depending on the re-enactment of a specific pose, dramatically lit, casting presumptuous shadows. These are images of total obedience standing at attention to something-or, better yet, someone who has already left the building.

There is an ongoing fascination with this specific era and its vital demand for purification and cleanliness to the point of mindlessly numbed transparency, from the texture of skin to the dark green or red curtain backdrop of a portrayed subject. Everything in this work is frozen, suspended. The ecstasy of being there is brought to one singular point. There is a sort of muted, silenced entanglement of the inner and the outer world. This is what I see, but what do these images mean? Or, more precisely, what do they want to provoke? Because provocative they are, in the sense that they celebrate the despicable, blatantly mimicking the authenticity of images we know, which we have seen a million times before. Yet, as they try to take us back to a specific moment in time, they become highly confrontational and uncanny.

Although the pictures are fully immobilized, subdued in the ultimate silence of being stunned, it's as if they are breathing down our necks. The idea of wideness and extreme vicinity seems to be tailor-made and engraved in our consciousness. They have turned into fashionable items that have become indulgent of themselves. Most of the subjects portrayed are of the male gender. Occasionally, females appear in these pictures, but they are only shown from the back, emphasizing their hairdo and how it is undone. It's this constant rehearsal and repetition of imagery that makes one uneasy, since it is relentless. Much has been written about the relation between body language and power, but once they appear singled out without their source of worshipping or the center to which they should pay the utmost attention, they start to look totally and inexplicably absurd. This being said, through the decisive and very specific choice of images, they also remain forever reminiscent.

The only antidote to such imagery-and this was also my reminiscence of them-is the numerous self-portraits in the paintings of Anton Räderscheidt from the late twenties. In the beginning of the thirties,

most of these paintings were confiscated by the Nazi regime, and nearly three--quarters of the artist's body of work was destroyed.

During my military service in the beginning of the eighties, when I was stationed as a reserve officer of what was then the Belgian occupying forces in Westhoven, outside of Cologne, one weekend I visited the Wallraf-Richartz--Museum, where I saw a room with three paintings by Anton Räderscheidt that had survived, surrounded by black-and-white reproductions that were labeled "verschollen." I found out that the artist's son was still alive and living in Cologne, so I paid him a visit to witness the fact that, until the end of his life, the artist never recovered from his own disillusion. It was heartbreaking. Back on the street, I couldn't help but remember the photograph August Sander once took of the artist, standing with his legs spread out, as if fixed on the urban pavement, looking at us with piercing eyes, looking at them.