

Eberhard Bosslet

EN - Lynn, Elwyn: Psychic maps of the new Berlin, The Australian, 24.10.1992

The Australian, 24.10.1992, by ELWYN LYNN

Psychic maps of the new Berlin

SYDNEY: Humpty Dumpty's Kaleidoscope:

New, Younger German Artists/Museum of Contemporary Art

THERE is none of the incredulous joy that accompanied the fall of the Berlin Wall in the vast and fascinating exhibition of a new generation of German artists at the Museum of Contemporary Art, its greatest success to date. In fact, it is sombre, solemn, subdued and desolate with none of the changing sparkle of colour usually provided by a kaleidoscope. Certainly it will take more than all the king's horses and all the king's men to put Germany together again.

The metaphor of the kaleidoscope is more relevant and, like all metaphors, difficult to explain. But as Bernice Murphy, curator of the show, elucidates in her introduction and exemplifies in her copious notes throughout the fine catalogue for home readers, the kaleidoscope destroys perspectives and hierarchies; it is the essence of artificiality and appropriate for this abounding pluralism because attempts now to characterise German art by its „heaviness“, „wild political declamation“ or „expressionistic aggressiveness“ are irrelevant.

However, Murphy suggests that Berliners will trace the changes in their environments through these, psychic cultural maps.

To understand that, the museum had space been available, could have shown its German holdings acquired before neo-expressionism as well as its neo-expression Penck, Salome, Franz Hitzler and Michael Reissdoerfer. They had a symbolic and riotous colour not to be found in the present cool collection.

The solemnity is due in large part to the fascinating photographs, both in their subjects and their techniques. Frank Thiel's great photographs of statues, some perhaps of the Russian war monument in East Berlin, kitsch on the grand scale, are divided by black bars as though the pompous past needed to be bound and gagged, but there are calmly lyrical colour photographs of rooms in subdued light by Candida Hofer, who presents rooms with empty chairs in the Museo Civico Vicenza, the Schloss Weimar, the Natural History Museum, London, and, in black and white, three views of the Zoological Gardens in Cologne: where are the human beings? The rule-makers have all departed.

Ulrich Golic covers walls from floor to ceiling with pale grey, almost white, photographic installations where images, right side up or on their sides, have been recorded in photographic emulsion. The images, though of recent events, look aged and worn as if the present were fleeing as it was recorded. Photography, pale and wan, becomes instant archaeology. In the same way Maix Mayer's photographs, often of landscapes where pagan rites were performed, struggle for survival as ragged silhouettes. He also has spaces invaded by inconsequential incidents: a bird, the corner of a bed, bottles and so on, curiously fleeting glimpses of the unimportant.

Bernhard Prinz's cool, clear-cut, unelaborated, simple photographs – a man in shorts in a circle, a sweet girl wearing a Mondrianish shirt and the same one, still sweet, wearing a shoulder chair – are about classical withdrawal from the hurly-burly of distorted expressionism; Hermann Pitz's 91 7 x 7cm polaroids are diaristic miniatures. You may trace a life and conclude that that day it rained dark pearls. You feel that for life to be recalled it must be compressed and repressed in a succession of tiny images. It happens to you all the time.

What happened to painting? It's there, free from wild, expressive fervour, though Anne Loch's giant eagle on rocks and the charge of the bison recall. But how serene is Karin Kneffel's Chicken Picture, where I counted 80 chicks of various types, but you can't be sure since they move? You might expect her two academic fire paintings to have some turbulence, but smoke and flames are as well-behaved as a Caspar David Friedrich.

