

AS I MOVED FROM LAST YEAR'S Art Forum Berlin to Frieze and finally to Art Basel Miami Beach, one artist's works were particularly striking – they were paintings depicting a golden Utopia in which the same model was arranged in a variety of poses. And I was not alone in being attracted to them; these works always seemed to be accompanied by a queue of collectors who wanted to find out more. All I knew about the artist, Norbert Bisky, was his age (34) and that he was born in Leipzig, the son of a powerful politician. Curious, I tracked him down to his Berlin studio, a series of sparsely furnished, large, bright rooms in a multi-ethnic quarter of the city that is currently undergoing a process of gentrification.

Over the next few hours we sat in front of several of his paintings, all in various stages of completion. (Bisky works on as many as ten at a time, sometimes wrapping them up if they are not going well and then returning to them at a later date.) The works on show were darker in quality than those I had seen in Miami – in one, a morsel of an arm hangs out of the mouth of a large, pansy-blue-eyed inno-

cent. 'That is based on a Goya I used to copy at the Prado,' he tells me. Old Masters are clearly an important source for Bisky and, as we explore the genesis of his ideas, he often refers to illustrated books from a library in his small office. At one point he pulls out a well-thumbed postcard of a Tiepolo in Wurzburg.

'I tell people to look at these paintings – there is like a soul connection between him and me. Don't you see it? Everybody reacts by asking "What are you talking about?" But Tiepolo feels like my brother – I have a really strong reaction to this painting. It's the same story.' Given the importance of these kinds of affinities, Bisky proposed that he would make a selection of images from his bookshelves, to accompany the interview that follows.



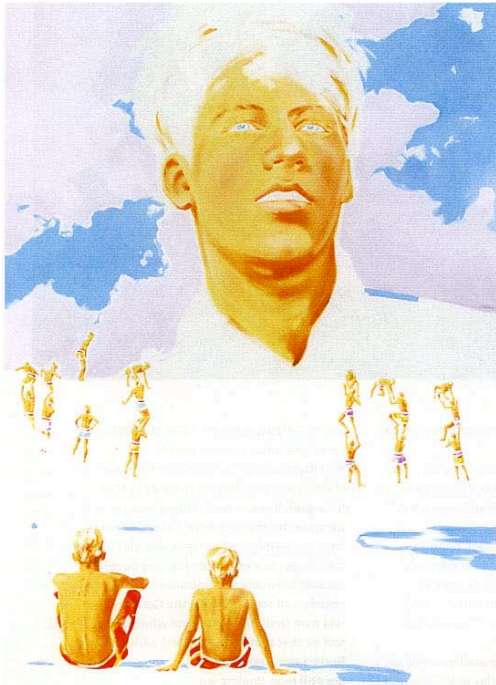
UNDER THE INFLUENCE

INTRODUCING NORBERT BISKY INTERVIEW BY KAREN WRIGHT

p. 76

Giambattista Tiepolo *The Glory of Spain*, 1764, (detail) Fresco, Throne Room, Palacio Real, Madrid
 COURTESY SCALA ARCHIVES

Tiepolo, for the light-weight colouring and the uninhibitedly decorative, the diagonal perspectives. Lots of art critics say he's not deep enough, but he's my soulmate



Opposite page
 Portrait of Norbert Bisky,
 Zinnowitz, Germany, 2002
 PHOTO: STEPHAN KONIG
 COURTESY THE ARTIST

Above left
Besteigung, 2004, oil on
 canvas, 200 x 150 CM
 COURTESY THE ARTIST AND GALERIE
 MICHAEL SCHULTZ, BERLIN
 © DACS, 2005

Gerhard Hillich: an East German painter from Berlin's Montmartre, Prenzlauer Berg. My first teacher, who told me to quit painting – the best thing he could have told me

Gerhard Hillich *Untitled*, 1972, oil on canvas, 60 x 80 cm
COURTESY ESTATE OF THE ARTIST



Norbert Bisky
Walkenbruch, 2004,
oil on canvas, 210 x 420 cm
COURTESY THE ARTIST AND GALLERIE
MICHAEL SCHULTZ, BERLIN
© DACS, 2005

KW I understand there was a particular moment when you decided that you were going to be an artist.

NB Yes, I took the decision after the Berlin Wall came down. I just felt that there was suddenly an explosion of possibilities. A lot of people around me at the time developed new fears: they thought that they would have to work in a bank and do something stable. But for me it was like a big party – everything had opened up. It was like winning the lottery – I could do whatever I wanted. To describe this as 'freedom' is a bit of a cliché, but I had a chance and I took it.

KW So if the genesis of your becoming an artist came at a time of political intensity, how much does your current work reflect this politics?

NB Well, the circumstances of the work are political. But, with my work, people make associations and see something that is in their own minds. I think my work is quite open to interpretation. And I like that.

Norman Rockwell: successful images for the masses, but the actual message is quite private

Norman Rockwell *A Good Sign All Over the World*, 1963, oil on canvas, 74 x 64 cm
CREATED FOR THE BROWN & BIDELOW BOY SCOUT CALENDAR ISSUES
COURTESY NATIONAL SCOUTING MUSEUM, IRVING, TEXAS



KW A lot of artists want to control how people see their work.

NB No, no, I really believe in freedom. I feel that you don't have to control other people's minds. Just leave them alone to see what they want to see.

KW Do you think that approach relates to the fact that you grew up in East Germany?

NB Yes. In that respect I know exactly what I am talking about, because I come from a world where everybody wanted to control you.

In a way, my paintings are like children. They have many possibilities in life. You tell them, 'I believe that you're good and I trust that wherever you are and whatever you do, you will do it right.' You can't say to a child, 'You have to call me every second day because I want to control you'. The same goes for painting. It depends on whether or not you have faith in what you are doing. And I do.

KW You left art school in 1999. How did your time there influence your work?

NB I had an important experience in 1995, when I got a scholarship to study in Madrid for a year. It was a real influence on my work because, for the first time, I saw Germany from the outside, which gave me a lot of new ideas. I got to experience the way people outside Germany see Germans in terms of clichés and stereotypes – the German tourists with their blond hair and white socks and all that stuff. Then, when I came back to Berlin I realised the extent to which Germans are still busy dealing with their internal politics: the German story – the East and West and the conflict between the two cultures – it's almost as though time is standing still. In a way it reflects the Cold War conflict between the American and Soviet cultures (East Germany was just like a part of Russia). And when you are inside it all you cannot really see what is going on.



AES+ F Le Roi des Aulnes #10, 2001, photographic print on canvas, from the cycle *The King of the Forest*
COURTESY THE ARTISTS

AES, for showing me on a Monday morning in Düsseldorf that I am closer to the Russians than to Jackson Pollock



Norbert Bisky Gomorrah, 2004, oil on canvas, 200 x 150 cm
COURTESY THE ARTIST AND GALERIE MICHAEL SCHULTZ, BERLIN © 2004, 2009

KW Your work does have overtones of Russian propaganda art. I think that's why one's first instinct is to see it as inherently political.

NB For an artist it is fascinating to have a world in your mind which does not exist anymore. I grew up with all these images of happy people, all these religious promises. You know Communism was like a church. They promised you that if you work hard and you stay with us you will reach paradise. It has a lot to do with my work because I try to paint those images of paradise and to see if it could really live up to the promise.

KW So, in part, you are painting from memory?

NB Yes, for sure, but then I got a shock. In my mind I was only engaging with an aspect of Russian culture. Because that is what I grew up with, as part of a very Communist family that really believed in all that stuff. Then later I realised there are quite similar images in American culture and in the ugly Nazi culture

as well. But I just wanted to get some of my childhood memories of those false promises out of my mind by putting them on canvas.

KW A kind of exorcism?

NB For sure. If I paint it I just get it out and it's not there anymore.

KW Have you been painting the same kinds of images since you left art school?

NB Well, yes, but it is changing right now.

I started with the Communist propaganda images but I was never really interested in just using the political signs and words in my paintings, so then I switched over to painting images from religions other than Communism – Christian images: scenes from Christ's last days, images of heaven and hell. I use these as part of a language that I am developing and I can do whatever I want with it.



Marina Abramovic, for her parents being heroes in socialist Yugoslavia, for her art being radically personal

Marina Abramovic
Cleaning the House,
1995, performance
at Sean Kelly Gallery,
New York
COURTESY SEAN KELLY GALLERY,
NEW YORK



Above
Norbert Bisky *Scheiß Spiel*, 2004, oil on canvas,
150 x 210 cm
COURTESY THE ARTIST AND GALLERY
MICHAEL SCHULTZ, BERLIN
© DACS, 2005

Facing page, left
Norbert Bisky *Höllentanz II* 2004, oil on canvas,
60 cm diameter
COURTESY THE ARTIST AND GALLERY
MICHAEL SCHULTZ, BERLIN
© DACS, 2005

KW Do you paint from life?

NB No, I just take Polaroids and paint from them. As an art student I wasn't really sure about what I wanted to do, but I did know that I wanted to be able to draw a figure in the correct way. It is a simple wish – shared by a lot of people who want to study art, but at the art academy during the 1990s, tutors would tell you that it was more important to do other things. I started drawing anyway using Polaroids of one friend – I couldn't afford to have lots of different people sit for me. And, after 15 years, I am still using the same model as I build up my paintings.

KW So, the same model appears in many guises, even within a single painting.

NB Yes. It might look quite contemporary, because a lot of photographers are experimenting with multiple portraits of the same sitter. But you will find that painters of the seventeenth century did the same. In Caravaggio's work, for example, you often see

the same model. Sometimes he doesn't even have different models for different sexes.

KW One of the things I like about your paintings is that even though you work from the Polaroids, the final product doesn't have that Photoshopy hyperreality that so much art today does. Your work is more an interpretation of photographs.

NB I don't think it is very interesting to have a photographic image and then paint it exactly. Gerhard Richter took it to the very end, but it is not interesting anymore. I miss the chaos.

You know, I don't even feel like a figurative artist. I feel more like a conceptual artist. I have an idea and I just want to express it. I am not a realist.

KW So, if Richter's no longer of interest to you, who is?

NB I have so many influences, but I would start with Henry Darger. I even started looking at Alex Katz when I entered the

academy. Then, at the beginning of the 1990s nobody would talk about him; now he is the Godfather again. There are even a lot of abstract influences in my work. And when I was in Spain I didn't have any studio space, so I just stood in the Prado and started copying works by Goya and Joaquin Sorolla. I had the idea I had to go back to a tradition which had almost vanished in 1990s Germany.

KW You were learning technique and artists need technique.

NB It is not a fetish – I don't get turned on by the smell of turps or the feel of a brush – it is just a tool for me to do something.

KW So talk me through your process.

NB I do preparatory drawings and, as I use the oil paint, I have to work very slowly as there are almost no possibilities to correct the paintings. Sometimes I simply have to put a painting in the garbage. That just happens.



KW Doesn't it upset you when you have to throw a painting away?

NB No. Not at all. I get upset if I just go on with a painting that I know is over. And then I spend more and more time with it and then finally have to put it in the garbage after all that.

KW So, what determines whether a painting should end up in the bin or on the wall?

NB I believe there must be an open space in the paintings – an entry space for the viewer, or even for me. Just white space where you can get into it. I don't like finished things, because finished is over, dead. When I went through the museums in my student years I was particularly interested in unfinished paintings, I loved them. You could really see what the painter was doing. It's hard to say when the painting is finished. It's hard to say it in words. It must work. You give yourself time. I'm very lazy and slow.

KW So as a young painter with so many collectors chasing your work do you find yourself under pressure to make paintings too quickly?

NB Not at all. When I was starting at the academy I felt a lot of pressure, because I told myself that there was a lot of competition. Now my days are quite simple. I'm just spending a lot of time in my studio. There's no telephone ringing, there are no people in the room. But there are quite a lot of people asking for a painting so I'm not able to fulfill all their wishes. And this gives me a lot of freedom, because if I cannot please them at all I don't have to start to try.

KW Good attitude! Do you think that's something that comes from your background, growing up in a time where you didn't have everything you wanted?

NB If the interest is serious people can wait. I have to wait too – until the painting is really at the point. It needs time. I don't care about the fucking art market. It has nothing to do

Giorgio Morandi, since he showed me how to paint the negative space. Because he really fucked the art world circus. Despite that, he taught us how to keep busy with just one theme. Probably as big as Picasso for me

Giorgio Morandi *Natura morta*, 1942, oil on canvas
COURTESY FONDATION STAMPA, BOCCA, PAVIA



Jörg Immendorff: the paintings are so immoderate: too much on them, too much in them – a real challenge. I'm still working on that

Jörg Immendorff *Solo*, 1974
COURTESY GALLERY MICHAEL WERNER, KÖLN AND NEW YORK



with quality, it has nothing to do with good painting so I don't care. It's fine just to have the possibility to live from your work, and to pay the rent for the studio. I always have the idea in mind that when Botticelli was an old man nobody cared about him because he was out of fashion. Imagine, Botticelli was out of fashion!

KW I'm told it can be a lonely occupation being an artist, it is you and your work and that's it.

NB But it is always better to make your own mistakes and not someone else's. ●

Norbert Bisky's work will be included in the second Prague Biennale, which will take place from late May to 18 September