

## BY PROFESSION: ALCHEMIST (NATURALLY)

*I believe the artist to be like a juggler: the more oranges he juggles the better he is. But if he has no overall vision of what he is doing, it all falls apart. As I mature as an artist, I want to juggle more and more oranges. A political artist is like a juggler with a single orange.*

Luis Camnitzer

As a whole, the work of Peter Krausz could be qualified as being equally paradoxical and ambiguous. Krausz is often singled out as the artist who *still* paints portraits, landscapes and still lives, but integrates them into series and/or installations which, in turn, could very well summon a questioning of the pertinence of such canonic styles as we near the millenium. On the other hand, this short-circuiting of art history's past and present is part of the very content of the artist's work. He brings forth analogous events by intertwining subject matter of different times. And then, one might note that this *playing* with time is carried out ever so naturally, keeping the spectator wondering which act released the other, and ensuring, perhaps, that he not want to know.

This is to say that no stone is left unturned. The artist does not shy away from overly esthetic disciplines, techniques or categories, nor does he avoid the weight of historically charged

subjects. Instead, he strives to define and reformulate a language according to his own needs. Krausz is convinced that it is of (human) nature to transcend time, and that this timeless quality often produces unfortunate results. His conviction lends itself to the title of this contemporary art exhibition which has little to do with any kind of systematic organization, although *DE NATURA (HUMANA)* as a title, clearly brings to mind the colours of a venerable philosophical treatise.

Krausz's willingness to disregard temporal limitations, as he believes is true of man's very nature, gives way to a body of work which does not manifestly offer formal unity. Similarly, the events to which the works refer are neither uniformly coherent nor univocal. Clearly, the artist wishes to sow the seeds of doubt. Whatever the cause, whatever the situation, he does not seek adhesion. And to this effect, he multiplies the structural ambiguities of his work. Not only does he combine painting - even fresco! - sculpture, text, photography, engraving and installation - moreover, subverting their effects - but he also nurses the overall ambiguity by stressing the resemblances between found objects and those he fabricated. It is as if he wanted to ensure that the viewer be leary of a direct reading or of any immediate significance. He himself has learned, over the past years, to mistrust the *innocent* beauty of certain sites.

And thus we view the two hundred and fifty lead plates of the series *TRACES-MEMOIRE* which bear the simple inscription of a place and date, recalling with placid gravity History's persecution of the Jews in France. Formally, we contemplate a striking metal tapestry or a tonal painting of varying shades of gray induced by the oxidized lead (bringing to mind a

previous series by Krausz where six *VUES DE TOLEDE* (views of Toledo) were fitted into their metal niches. And it should not come as a surprise that as a whole, this work has the appearance of a very attractive found object...

In fact, the plates are entirely fabricated, unlike the information for which they serve as a support - the flip side of the tapestry! The information, we discover, plainly refers to events which occurred between 535 and 1990. It becomes difficult, then, to look beyond the chromatic variations, the cool sameness, and the infernal accumulation of the plates - same format, same material, same engraved characters - without a sense of growing embarrassment. The simple repetition interiorizes the fear, which increases as we acknowledge the uncertain presence of the sliced animal tongues. Here we come to terms, or perhaps not, with a body of work which is organized only in appearance, and whose fictitious enactment pertains both to museological classifications and fragmentary reconstructions of memory.

In the series of large format photographs - somewhat fluid representations of old men in shower stalls - memory most certainly still comes into play. It becomes difficult for the viewer to pinpoint the cause of his malaise. To what extent is this feeling brought about by the proximity of the lead plates? However different, the associations between the two pieces abound.

Again the use of lead. More than simply framing the photographs, the heaviness of the lead disorients and displaces by enhancing both the pictural and sculptural effects of the photographed subjects. The very sense of the work broadens with the addition of the lead frames suggesting the presence of windows, at once altering the status of the viewer to that of

voyeur (analogously, the fourteen small, “innocuous” landscapes of the series *NIGHT TRAIN* become intensely disquieting as we acknowledge that they are framed by the windows of an enigmatic train).

The nakedness of the people in the photographs suggests the idea that the inscribed lead sheets can somehow be equated to a skin, one which has been *abused* prior to its insertion into this tragic mosaic. And yet, the photographs remain pleasing to the eye, captivating. Their coloration speaks of the charm of certain aquariums, not to mention the beauty of liquefaction as understood by Francis Bacon.

As Krausz takes pleasure in confronting different modes of expression, begging the rise of new questions, he also freely shifts from one tone to another, breathing air into his work, as into life itself. Finally allowing himself to indulge, the artist no longer turns his back to certain skills acquired at the Bucharest Academy of Fine Arts: he works with fresco to convey a particular type of Mediterranean landscape, at once decidedly serene and civilized, whose effect acts as a counterbalance to the works discussed above.

However, yet again, the traditional technique is *displaced*. Presented as *an* installation in the sober surroundings of a contemporary art gallery, the frescoes in fact, convey a vast, vertically fragmented landscape with intervals of silence, as if it were preferable to hush the fact that many of the crimes commemorated elsewhere were perpetrated in analogous sites. And it is human nature - the same one - which is responsible for so much horror and so much beauty. It becomes difficult for the spectator to look freely, without distrust, at these slices of landscapes with their backgrounds of small winding roads...

As these lines are being written, *SITES UNSEEN* - the last work in this exhibition - had not yet acquired its final form; no more than the installation of frescoes. To begin with, there are twenty-odd small funerary plates shaped as hearts, found by the artist at a second-hand dealer's shop in France. Krausz will work with these as he has with the other found (and transmuted) objects which formed his *VUES DE TOLEDE*: he will *set the stage* so that they retain their original sense while being receptive to the various new meanings a different environment can offer: a small cemetery-like pond where the hearts will rise to the surface as Nymphaea.

At first glance the tone is elegiacal, and *SITES UNSEEN* could be more plausibly associated with the fresco landscapes than with *TRACES-MEMOIRE*. Still, the correlations between the works seem to multiply as do the small hearts of the installation: the feelings are contagious, especially those of doubt and uneasiness. The viewer's memory quickly reassesses the small washed-out enamel plates to relate them to the lead rectangles - after all, they do share a common purpose. Similarly, the colours of the "pond" can be seen to parallel those found in the photographs of aging men. A slow and *peaceful* death loses its innocence, and the tone of the installation is transformed... slowly.

Should he stop transmuting lead, at heart, Peter Krausz would remain an alchemist of sorts.

Gilles Daigneault

Translation: Jennifer Couëlle