

Longing for colour

Michela Ghisetti's multifaceted artistic work moves between the poles of abstraction and figuration. Only recently she had a successful exhibition at the Albertina Museum in Vienna. During a visit to her studio, she presented her new, colourful series of works.

By Silvie Aigner

The title "Tutto" for the exhibition catalogue of her retrospective at the Albertina was quite fitting. The frequent changes of style, the oscillation between abstract and hyper-realistic, meticulously crafted drawings are characteristic of Michela Ghisetti, but initially they confounded the art scene and to a degree even herself, as she explained to us in our conversation. Yet Ghisetti developed a comforting independence from the "signature style" that is in demand on the art market, without being any less successful – on the contrary. "Today I can stand by it in a relaxed and self-confident manner. All of this is me, and I definitely see my different series of works as a journey, as motion, which is strongly influenced by my inner feelings, my biography, but also by my engagement with social and art-theoretical themes." For her, art is "a large inner space" that she wants to fill in the most diverse ways.

Michela Ghisetti was born in Bergamo, Italy, in 1966 and has lived in Vienna since 1992. She studied painting at the Accademia di Belle Arti Giacomo Carrara in Bergamo and graphic art under Gunter Damisch at the Vienna Academy of Fine Arts. She became known for her hyper-realistic portraits, drawn with coloured pencils and graphite – from the series "Domenica" to the large-format portraits "Felicia" and the triptych "Afua", which were created around 2010/2012. In addition, she also regularly looked at old and new – at least male – masters such as Jan Vermeer or Gerhard Richter and reformulated the entrenched history of art with a feminist impetus. Aspects of the presentation and representation of women in contemporary society, but also questions of diversity and integration, were at the centre of her work at the time.

The role of women

The black corset, trademark of Hamburg prostitute Domenica Niehoff, was symbolic of social and cultural constriction and at the same time an erotic fetish. The trigger for her "Domenica series" was a book about Niehoff that Ghisetti found in a second-hand bookshop. The photo portraits of Domenica in her black corset conveyed both a feeling of openness and, at the same time, an inner retreat that denied the viewer a glimpse of her true self. Fascinated by this ambivalence, Ghisetti had a corset tailored. Her own sense of confinement in a life between family and studio, her longing for freedom, led to an engagement with the role of women in society per se. When Ghisetti began the series, her artistic career took off. In 2005 she received the Strabag Artaward. In 2012, this was followed by acquisitions by the Albertina and her first solo exhibitions.

Biographical experiences

Emotionally formative biographical experiences, and the fact that hyperrealism had also been exhausted for her artistically, led her to a new formal language. "At some point the time had

come to end these works. In Sicily I then cut the corset into small pieces and handed it over to the sea, and let it go. I realised that it's not about how perfectly a portrait is painted or drawn, because the doing is always abstract. I no longer had that pressure of having to prove something to myself. I also didn't want to repeat myself and it was time for something new. I also had a great longing for colour. It was like a tabula rasa," says Ghisetti. Among other things, a wonderful series with coloured pencils and collage technique on a black background followed. On a trip to Morocco, she became acquainted with the world of Berber carpets. But it was not so much their front sides that interested her as the back, where the threads are sewn and the pattern that can be seen at the front dissolves chaotically. "At that time, it totally suited me to oppose my order with this 'non-order'."

Colour explosions

This gave rise to the series "Magic Carpet" and "Salt Bags", which are based on the salt bags carried by nomads on their camels in the desert. Many of the works have a definite, albeit not accurately drawn, central axis. "I have seen in the carpet warehouses in Morocco that the carpets are folded. When you open them, they still bear the marks of the folding in the fabric. I fell in love with this central axis and then emphasised it in my works," explains Ghisetti. The most recent works on display in her studio are a veritable explosion of colour. The boundaries of the paintings seem to dissolve. Many elements, such as the dots, the dripping of colour, the interlacing of layers of paint, seem to follow the principle of flow and release, as does the gestural flow. Currently, she mainly creates large formats that allow her "to be in the middle of the picture, not to see it as something I am confronting from the outside". Her objects are also of astonishing colourfulness and materiality. During a stay in Accra, Ghana, she encountered the glass bead art of Africa and began to integrate it into her artistic work. This resulted in the room-filling installation "Unus Mundus", executed in collaboration with a Viennese glassblowing factory – two strings of glass beads, one black with colourful dots, the other white-turquoise, intertwined. Naturally, the desire for colour and materiality play a role in these objects, but those who know Ghisetti are aware that there is also more to it. "The theme of the strings of beads, the threading together, has to do with holding together, with integration. The two different coloured strings of beads emphasise the theme and pick out the opposites, day, night, rich, poor, colourful and pale."

Che Bambole!

Her puppet sculptures "Che Bambole!", on the other hand, are a cheerful troupe of objects that Ghisetti has assembled from a range of everyday items. Inspired by African tribal art, she created her own fertility dolls out of drums, feather dusters, industrial brushes and trivets, whose original function is admittedly no longer apparent. Ghisetti's series of works always seem self-referential, but in the synopsis in the artist's Vienna studio, you can see how one interlocks with the other, how much each of these series of works is interwoven with the others. For example, the doll objects were already present as an idea in drawings from 1998, dots and circles appear again and again as motifs, and the artist already worked with an abstract, experimental formal language during her studies with Gunter Damisch. Ghisetti is convinced that the many approaches to exploring life are just as diverse as the artistic language of form. "I know today that both are in me, the exact, figurative work as well as abstraction. It always just depends on what corresponds to my inner urgency. Actually, I

always wanted to combine the two poles. It's not the easiest thing to do, but it's an ambition of mine."

[Quotation]

"Art is an inner space that I want to fill in the most diverse ways". Michela Ghisetti became known for her hyper-realistic portraits, drawn with coloured pencils and graphite.

[Photo Caption 1]

"Unus Mundus" - two strings of glass beads intertwined. They emphasise the theme of cohesion and integration.

[Photo Caption 2]

TRAVEL MEMORY. The Salt Bags series is inspired by the salt bags carried by nomads on their camels in the desert.

[Photo Caption 3]

Salt Bags, Series 20/2017 or Series 1/2016, (picture below) acrylic and coloured pencils on paper, 77 x 56 cm, © Michela Ghisetti, image rights Vienna, 2022

[Photo Caption 4]

Tutto 3/16, 2016, acrylic on paper, 177 x 56 cm, © Michela Ghisetti, image rights, Vienna 2022