



Josefine Reisch interviewed by curator Paul Luckraft, 28 August 2018

**Paul Luckraft:** Can I start by asking about your choice of the profile as a motif? Where does your interest in this style of portraiture come from?

**Josefine Reisch:** One reason is that it's an outline which doesn't convey all the typical psychological ideas about the 'female look'. All these assigned conditions – the seductive or scared look – the profile doesn't have that; it's more analytical. There is also an association with coins and relief medals, which are a loaded kind of portrait – very authoritative.

**PL:** In this show you've drawn specifically on the Renaissance portraiture of the Pollaiuolo brothers. When did you first come across them?

**JR:** There's one painting in Berlin in the Gemäldegalerie which I saw quite early on in my life. I often come back to objects or paintings I saw a long time ago. The Pollaiuolo brothers' works, in comparison to Botticelli, say, are flat. They are not as sophisticated.

**PL:** The Pollaiuolos' female sitters are often unnamed, I believe?

**JR:** Yes, lots of women have been unnamed subjects over the last few hundred years. If not an aristocrat then they don't have any kind of identity that's worth recording for posterity. The paintings are status symbols, probably made just after the women got married. The sitter becomes an object, just to show. That is why my paintings focus more on the decorative aspect rather than the actual person.

**PL:** The word 'profile' connects to contemporary social media self-portraiture. And the Renaissance female subjects possess an aspiration to be part of their world of images, perhaps?

**JR:** I think what contemporary selfie culture and Renaissance portraits have in common is probably objectification, but definitely aspiration. I see

aspiration as a human condition. It makes things move on, somehow. Today there are more portraits than ever, an overflow. The Renaissance portrait and a selfie act as a kind of promotion or advertising, and that interests me. They are in a difficult space between empowerment and objectification. The title of my show is *Celetoids*, meaning an ephemeral celebrity that lacks a real reason to be famous. These Renaissance women painted by the Pollaiuolo brothers, have a legacy as they hang on walls, but the women themselves are not really known. They are purely an image.

**PL:** Your show contains a series of paintings of the same size, each with a blue sky background. The image of a face appears at different points, like it's moving against a generic plane.

**JR:** Yeah, I want to try to get this feeling of the swipe, familiar from screens. I am also producing certain overlaps and degrees of focus on different parts of each portrait, so it becomes really fractured. The sky background is very popular in both photo booths and 15th-century portraiture. Making paintings for me is about decision-making, and I like to limit myself in certain ways.

**PL:** Chris Rojek, who coined the term *celetoids*, discusses 'staged authenticity'. This seems like a key phrase linking your subject matter and your particular analytical approach to making work.

**JR:** There are different layers of authenticity that I question, including the painting process itself. I always work in a staged or framed setting. Within this I'm able to have very different references coexisting. I have Renaissance painting and then the 20th-century painter Gluck, who is a queer icon. By framing them in the same way, I am able to work with contradiction and complexity.

**PL:** What is your approach to historical research, because it sounds like it is not about neat narratives?

**JR:** Most of the time neat conclusions are not really that convincing. A few years ago I was trying to get a more logical outcome from my different references, but I didn't find that interesting or empowering. I am not an art historian so I don't feel like I have to submit to such parameters. The diversity of the references is key because they actually all come from an omnipresent European cultural heritage. The idea of Europe is really complicated, it comes from different parts of history and is transforming all the time.

**PL:** Limiting yourself to a Euro-centric frame of reference is provocative, perhaps, in that today an artist's field of reference can be so wide when there is so much information at hand.

**JR:** It is something I feel entitled to comment on and transform it for my own purposes. I question its legacy by using it. I can deconstruct certain objects because I'm part of this heritage and it's accessible to me.

**PL:** Would you say your fascination with particular motifs is slightly obsessive?

**JR:** Very obsessive and subjective. Certain characters recur all the time. I'm not really interested in plain hero figures. I'm interested in personalities that are what in theatre is called 'mixed character', neither good nor bad.

**PL:** Let's talk about the sculpture in the show, made of pink wax.

**JR:** In the studio I sometimes need to do something that loosens up my obsessiveness, so the wax sculptures are a way to do this. The one here references the tiered frames the painter Gluck patented in the 1930s. It's also similar to a tulipiere shape, a bit like a temple. I've worked with wax before and chose beeswax, thinking about tulips and bees and other royal connotations. There was a coherency in

the idea for that show and the material. For *Celetoids* I decided on dental wax because it's used in the face. Death masks are made out of wax: Caesar's face, for example, is still around, cast in wax.

**PL:** Talking of famous historical figures, you are also working on a new version of an ongoing performance project for the Invites event.

**JR:** Yes. *PS: I Love U* is a musical reading by me and my friend Nora Hansen. It includes real love letters from historical figures, but also contemporary pop songs. We've performed it two times so far. It's a site-specific piece so the script changes depending on the occasion. Nora and I have been talking a lot about Brecht's epic theatre. In contrast to the cathartic moment, epic theatre establishes a distance to the character, giving the audience a chance to have their own ideas. In my work there's similarly a certain distance to the actual object I might reference.

**PL:** Do you think it's trickier to maintain that distance when you're depicting the human face? In the new paintings you incorporate your own profile, so they also investigate self-portraiture.

**JR:** Definitely, that's the challenge! For a piece of art to be interesting to me, it needs a certain amount of personal investment. Maybe even embarrassingly so for the person who makes it. Including my own face is really about appropriation, and the ethics of taking something that's not yours.

**PL:** Hair is another motif in the show, and you focus on its sculptural properties.

**JR:** Yes, hair is an adaptable frame of the face. There a Siri Hustvedt essay, 'Much Ado About Hairdos', which discusses the ritualistic braiding and combing of hair, and then, more obviously, there is the Medusa myth.

**PL:** Hustvedt also talks about hair being a dead material without sensation, an extension of our bodies that is disconnected from us in a strange way.

**JR:** It can also work like a layer of protection. The use of hair for women often is about ornament and décor. It can be empowering to change style: a political statement.

**PL:** Hair is only one strand of the show, however. Your work is layered with symbols and metaphors, and I sense you don't necessarily want to fall into tried-and-tested associations?

**JR:** I'm not really interested in making shows that have one plot; that's not how my brain works. It's much more confused, and there is more strength in different things coexisting.

**PL:** I'd agree your practice encompasses a lot of references, but it's not a grab bag of random elements thrown together. There is a clearly a lot of selection and editing.

**JR:** There's an essay I'm really influenced by, Ursula Le Guin's 'The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction'. It questions the A-to-B logic of a hero performing an act, a man hunting things. This is a very male narrative that's extremely simplifying, and what Le Guin proposes is for fiction to have loads of characters, and they're all in this bag and nobody's sitting on a pedestal. I don't want to equalise my references, to suggest that an image by Gluck is the same as a painting by Pollaiuolo, but I think they can be in the same narrative.

**PL:** In the same sack.

**JR:** They can all sit in the same sack. I can shake them and see where that story goes.

Reverse: *Profile #23*, 2018. Oil on canvas. 30 x 40 cm. Courtesy the artist and Galerie Noah Klink

**Artist's presentation** Sunday 28 Oct, 3pm. Free

With her collaborator Nora Hansen, Reisch performs the third iteration of *PS: I Love U*, a musical reading that analyses the most private writings of their idols – love songs and love letters. Merging these writings on a timeless stage the protagonists enter a dialogue on love, life and friendship.

**Josefine Reisch** (b. 1987, Berlin, Germany) lives and works in London. She graduated from Kunstakademie Düsseldorf in 2013 and completed an MFA in Fine Art at Goldsmiths in 2017. Recent solo and two-person shows include *Stampede*, Gallerie Noah Klink, Berlin (2018); *Plus Que Moi*, Kunsthaus NRW, Aachen; *Tender Constructions (Hong Kong Cappuccino)* with Sarah-Jane Hoffmann, Bruch und Dallas, Cologne and *Let the adventures begin...* with Nora Hansen, GOLDSMITHSGALLERY, London (all 2016). Her work has also been shown at the Mothers & Daughters Bar at Beursschouwburg, Brussels, White Cubicle, London and Bob's Pogo Bar at KW Institute for Contemporary Art, Berlin, among others.

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