

Konrad Tobler

PICTURES, STORIES

Whether dream, reality, or imagination: images or pictures have their own truth. It is an imaginary or pictured truth, as it were; or, to put it more cautiously, a depicted truth. This truth of depictions achieves its reality: as a real picture that has a real effect.

What kind of effect, then, do the paintings of Anna Altmeier have? What realities transpire in them? Another unexpected level opens up here: we must speak of realities in the plural, because the pictures are layered. We cannot expect them to be unambiguous. Even if we consider the picture series as cycles with self-contained narratives – as indicated by titles like *'girl without a name'* and *'snow white grows up'* –, the stories are nevertheless ambiguous, that is, multilayered and multifaceted. They emerge from the depths of the inexplicable, they remain tangible for a moment, like a dream we see vividly upon waking, only to be instantly forgotten. The stories return to the realm of the inexplicable.

The Skin of Painting

Because the inexplicable is uncertain, we're staying on the surface for now. Let's call this the skin of painting, which can be described technically. In the words of the artist: "All pictures are painted on transparently primed linen in a mix of oil, acrylic, and chalk, incorporating the raw, uncolored canvas into the action of the image." The mix is created in a process of applying, painting over, scraping off, and reapplying paint, which appears drier at times – when mixed with chalk – and more fluid at other times; sometimes it is applied with a palette knife, sometimes scraped off again. It's almost as if we can hear the process at work, scratching and scraping and grating. Not in one move but repeatedly. If these paintings were murals, they would surely not be done *al fresco*, on the fresh plaster, but layered and scraped and repainted *al secco* on the canvas. But beyond the technical aspect, the skin of painting in Anna Altmeier's work is, in an eminent sense, the skin of what appears. The painting sounds described above always have a meaning that involves the approach to materiality as well as a sometimes painful physical and mental level or layer.

So this is how the layered story begins, this is how the stories of these pictures begin.

Floating Pictures, Floating Stories

The scene is almost always nocturnal, with mostly muted colors, though they flare up here and there, lucid yet flickering. Paradoxically, this makes the image atmosphere darker, with gloom lighting up here and there. The picture is a theater stage for people to enter, to move about on, before they disappear again to someplace else. When they appear, they seem to turn night into day, yet they dwell on their thoughts – how do these show themselves, how can we guess them? – as if they were absent, as if in a dream that is neither daydream nor nightmare. The reality that reveals itself to us on the picture stage is floating. And so are the people, balancing as if on a rope over an abyss. They are never on firm ground.

Thus, the stories must be floating too, the stories told by the individual pictures as cycles, told by the cycles in *pictures*, without words; only the titles of the cycles – and thus, of the individual booklets – guide us. They are presented together here, so as to further pursue the trail of the incomprehensible.

INSOMNIA: Youth in the daze of the night. Desires and hopes. Fears and disappointments.

Satisfaction and solitude. What is the morning after the frenzied, sleepless hours?

FEVERISH TIMES: There was a film once called Saturday Night Fever. With somnambulistic and awake dancing. Glamour accompanied by melancholy. And a mirror question: Who am I?

CENTRIFUGAL FORCES: It's night once again. Time of unrest. Where does the path lead? It leads outside, inside. Images of memory, mixed with the glimmering, uncertain present.

SNOW WHITE GROWS UP: Fairytales – layers of the unconscious. Brought to light, they tell tales of

entanglement. Will things turn out well, or end in death. Everything returns to the realm of the in- explicable.

RESIDUAL LIGHT – FRAGMENTS OF BEING: Just a patchwork, chasing the wind in the flickering lights of the night. The stairs lead up and down into nowhere. A gallery of yesterday – faded.

GIRL WITHOUT A NAME: She entered the picture coming from the picture, going somewhere.

Pictures were forming around her. Birds and people were swimming around. In her dream, she was searching for her name.

ORBITS: And love after all. But only through suites of rooms onto the stage of illusory worlds. In the mirrors, bugs greet us. The man returns from Africa. The curtain drops.

Scrapes

These retellings or parallel tales give an impression of how many aspects and elements play a *role* in the individual pictures, not to mention in the cycles – yet another reference to the theater or peep - show character of these picture formations. The numerous aspects and elements need to be seen as layers – which brings us back to the skin of painting. The layers are the result of scraping. The artist scrapes as she paints. Thus, a portrait from the year 2010 is tellingly titled “Scraping.” The word “to scrape” comes from Middle English, “scrapian” in Old English, meaning to remove from a surface. A semantic field with at least four different meanings has evolved from this. The first is to make a grating sound. This is related to the fresco character of painting, to sgraffito, to carving and scratching. Or is it the scratching that produces a scrape, a wound, an abrasion? By dealing with words in this way, we approach the subliminal mental impetus that surfaces in Altmeier’s paintings. This corresponds to the second meaning of “scrape”: to injure the skin by rubbing it against a rough surface. Third, scraping also happens in mining, when mineral resources are extracted/quarried. This, in turn, has given rise to an idiomatic phrase, according to which we investigate thoroughly if we scrape below the surface of things.

These things could be the psyche, they could be dreams, dream fragments, and memories – precisely the moments that come to light in these pictures, through scraping. And layers that are non- simultaneous can be spatially present right next to each other (like layers in a painting). As art critic Annelise Zwez aptly puts it: “The present shimmers as if it were the future of the past.” A note by Anna Altmeier also speaks of this simultaneity of the non-simultaneous: “These are old stories, constantly repeating stories, memories; they happened long ago, and yet, everything always starts all over again. Life goes on, mercilessly.”

Memories – Layered, Faded, Tangled

“Life goes on, mercilessly” – this recalls a short, important essay by Sigmund Freud, “A Note upon the ‘Mystic Writing-Pad,’” first published in 1924. The text addresses the structure and traces of memory. Because memory is fleeting, and we rightly distrust our minds, we can write things down on a piece of paper, for instance; but the sheet of paper quickly fills up, and new memories impose themselves. The second option that Freud suggests is a slate. We can wipe the slate clean to make room for the new memories that are pouring in – at the cost of losing older memories. Today, we would suggest writing memories down on a computer. But would we manage to keep track of the memory traces?

Freud eventually turns to a simple but wondrous device, which probably fascinated most of us as children: “Now some time ago there came upon the market, under the name of the ‘Mystic Writing- Pad,’ a small contrivance that promises to perform more than the sheet of paper or the slate. It claims to be nothing more than a writing-tablet from which notes can be erased by an easy movement of the hand. But if it is examined more closely it will be found that its construction shows a remarkable agreement with my hypothetical structure of our perceptual apparatus and that it can in fact provide both an ever-ready receptive surface and permanent traces of the notes that have been made upon it.

The Mystic Pad is a slab of dark brown resin or wax with a paper edging; over the slab is laid a thin transparent sheet, the top end of which is firmly secured to the slab while its bottom end rests on it without being fixed to it. This transparent sheet is the more interesting part of the little device. It

itself consists of two layers, which can be detached from each other except at their two ends. The upper layer is a transparent piece of celluloid; the lower layer is made of thin translucent waxed paper. [...] If we lift the entire covering-sheet – both the celluloid and the waxed paper – off the wax slab, the writing vanishes and, as I have already remarked, does not re-appear again. The surface of the Mystic Pad is clear of writing and once more capable of receiving impressions. But it is easy to discover that the permanent trace of what was written is retained upon the wax slab itself and is legible in suitable lights.”

For Freud, the writing pad is the model for memory, both present and past, stored in the unconscious. The two levels or layers are interlaced. If we scrape deeply and carefully enough, we will be able to decipher the layers gradually, though never completely. These are processes we need to consider when engaging with Anna Altmeier’s pictures.

Young Women, Mirror Games, Interiors

For all the processual quality underlying these layered paintings, we can compile/decipher a sort of inventory of recurring motifs that carry the stories/memories.

Especially conspicuous is the fact that young women appear as the protagonists: Snow White is the one who has a name; the “Girl without a Name” is named namelessly; the others remain anonymous, despite sometimes being individualized in portraits. The women are vulnerable, fragile, exposed, especially when they appear in their tutus, as typecast protagonists, sometimes just as half-figures, shockingly faceless and interchangeable. They are reminiscent of Edgar Degas’ ballerinas – and thus of the golden age of ballet fairytale characters: sylphs, Giselle, Sleeping Beauty, or the Pharaoh’s Daughter. However, they are fairytale characters of the here and now, as evidenced by their sneakers.

Mirrors are another important motif, for instance in “Mirror Game” (orbits) with its multiple mirrors. Mirrors are a medium of self-assurance and self-reflection but also of inversion. Mirrored, reversible figures and ambiguous images have played an important role in art history for centuries; take, for instance, Pierre Bonnard’s Post-Impressionist paintings. Invariably, a mirror is also an image within an image. Anna Altmeier also employs the image within the image variously when she presents picture galleries, as in the painting “Super Old Stories” (also in orbits), or in “Souvenirs” (residual light). The picture galleries allude to memories, but the subjects of the pictures are barely recognizable. Thus, the galleries are also metaphors, as it were, for the functioning of memory: not always sharp, sometimes fading, a (haphazard) selection of possible impressions.

Finally, we need to mention the interiors and suites of rooms, which are yet another part of Altmeier’s picture stages. Once again, both are essential motifs in the history of painting. Like mirrors, interiors – which evidently include galleries – are a popular subject of Romanticism, in particular. The interior is always a metaphor for intimacy, and the room is a second skin. Just like the uncanny dwells in our psyche – as much as we would like to suppress it –, the familiar interior of our house contains the unexpected. In the calm of sleep and wakefulness, fears have their time and their place. We know this from our childhood, when shadows become creatures, when things become outsized in a fever. Something is lurking behind the curtains. And all of this is heightened when one room follows another, suites of rooms, enfilades open up, stairs lead to the basement or the attic. What might be hidden there? Not coincidentally, in classic detective novels, it is often in interiors that evil disrupts the ordinary course of events. In his volume of short prose titled *One-Way Street* (1928), the German philosopher Walter Benjamin states: *“The furniture style of the second half of the nineteenth century has received its only adequate description, and analysis, in a certain type of detective novel at the dynamic centre of which stands the horror of apartments. The arrangement of the furniture is at the same time the site plan of deadly traps, and the suite of rooms prescribes the fleeing victim’s path. That this kind of detective novel begins with Poe – at a time when such accommodations hardly yet existed – is no counter-argument.”*

An Afterglow of Romanticism and Surrealism

With Edgar Allan Poe and his detective novels, we have arrived in the aftermath of Romanticism. Poe was an admirer of E. T. A. Hoffmann, in whose “Nachtstücke” (Night Pieces) the uncanny

makes itself at home in the familiar. In their own way, Altmeier's pictures are also night pieces, though of our time, of course. Yet, the darkness of Romanticism lingers. After all, art is not created in a timeless space; that is especially true of painting with its long history (which was already mentioned in passing). Alongside Romanticism, Symbolism plays a role in Altmeier's paintings – both movements that were admired by the Surrealists, who delved deeper into them and deliberately propelled them toward the Freudian unconscious. Now, when we talk about models, that is not to say that the cycles in question here are imitations. Altmeier's art is too distinctive for that. But it contains something atmospheric that can be described as an afterglow.

Clues come from all the "strange guests" that show up – especially in the 'GIRL WITHOUT A NAME' cycle: insects, bugs, birds, fish, but also hanged figures, a carousel, little skeleton figures reminiscent of the Mexican artist José Guadalupe Posada ("The Price of Love," RESIDUAL LIGHT). If any Surrealist has condensed all of this, it is Leonora Carrington, who addresses – or rather, visualizes – the uncanny in the story fragment "House of Fear."

A Wide Field

If everything could be said about pictures, about Altmeier's paintings, then the artist wouldn't need to paint. For example, nothing has been said yet of the twilight landscapes, which play an important role as picture stages in their own right, much like the interiors. But since everything cannot be said, nothing more shall be said here. The pictures have their own truth, opening up their own realities.

*Art-historic Text from Konrad Tobler, Art Critic and Curator, Bern CH
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