

Me & My

- ‘What’s the worst thing in the world?’ asked Patricia one morning, when we walked around her garden, looking at the flowers.
- ‘To lose yourself in love,’ went my prompt answer, ‘When the ver- in verliebt is the same as the ver- in verzweifelt.’ I was a puddle, but the garden was starting to bloom. Spring, ruthless sun. I lashed out at a peony, and its rain soaked head fell to the ground in pieces.
- ‘To ruin is easy enough; an indulgence even.’ Patricia looked at me disapprovingly. ‘No, the worst thing in the world’, she said, coming to a halt in her wellies, erect and steady, like an actress on a stage, ‘is to see yourself fall apart through the eyes of your lover.’
- ‘How do you see through someone else’s eyes?’ I poked at the petals with the nose of my sneaker.
- ‘It’s like looking at a painting,’ she said, pausing. ‘Their gaze is suddenly not only a reflection, but a window that allows you to look into the distance. What you see there you cannot recognise, still it is an image that will never leave you.’

In Lotte Laserstein’s picture “Ich und mein Modell” (1929-30) we see the painter in her frock, staring intently back at us while holding her brush to the canvas. The way she looks at us, it’s like we are the subject of the work in progress, not pictured, just outside the frame. But behind her, as suggested by the title, is her model.

She can be identified as Traute Rose, and she appears in many of Laserstein’s paintings. Here she looks apprehensive – anxious, even. But the painting underway is not likely to unveil some scandal of her subconscious. No, what will emerge on the canvas is the world as seen through Laserstein’s eyes. By which I mean Traute, or what I like to assume is Laserstein’s romantic love for Traute, the part of her own being that love has installed in every image of Traute, and onto which the spotlight of Traute’s weary eyes will now fall. Is the painter even able to see her model, I mean understand her at all? Does the painter love her model? Or is her love held hostage by self-doubt? To fail at producing the sliver of truth sometimes contained in art under the weight of your model’s eyes would be devastating. Thus, Traute’s worry is not for her own vanity, but for the continued integrity of Laserstein’s selfimage, which naturally will come to bear on her own happiness, too.

Laserstein’s stern look, on the other hand, shows no sign of wavering; she is determined to steer clear of despair. But since Traute is in the picture rather than in front of the easel, it seems likely that the subject of “Ich und mein Modell” is not the young semi-dressed lady, but the coming into being of pictures as such; in fact the gap between what is referred to and what is, in the end, on view. It is an analogy. The model of the painting’s title, then, is the model of all of Laserstein’s work, regardless of what we might see in it, whether a bouquet, snowy roof tops, or another person entirely, a tennis player, or a child. The model is the answer both to the question of why and how she paints – as well, perhaps, as why sometimes she doesn’t. There are mornings, I am sure, when such a facial expression is not part of one’s arsenal.

Earlier this year, the art historian Griselda Pollock was in conversation with artist Monika Baer about the latter’s exhibition at NBK in Berlin, and the relationship between a painter and her subject more generally. On that occasion Pollock took a swing at the popular feminist idea that looking itself is necessarily heterosexual and male, or, by extension, either fetishistic or sadistic: “There is no such thing as the male gaze. Laura Mulvey used that phrase once in 1975 and it has been a burden ever since.” Mulvey based her argument that certain apparatuses, particularly the cinematic, had masculinised the viewing position on Freud’s theory of castration anxiety – “and you have to buy into that to buy into the notion,” Pollock rightly remarked. “But we all know that the attempt to structure the gaze around the anxiety caused by masculine heterosexuality does not exhaust all the sorts of things that go with gazing,” she concluded, reminding us that the eroticisation of looking, as well as a penchant for exhibitionism, are primary to humans. Might we not, then, in Laserstein’s portraits of Traute, find something much more complex and unstable than a predatory, proprietary gaze? I think these are portraits of risk-taking; delicate negotiations between intimacy and creativity.

With regards to Artemisia Gentileschi's "Judith Slaying Holofernes", Baer later made the case that, though we might presume to identify the artist with Judith, in the moment she splattered the women's dresses with bloodstains, she was Holofernes. Pollock added that it is a mistake to make an artist the narrative centre of her own painting. "She is all the characters because she has to be in order to paint them." I might weigh in that all the characters, too, are her; they'd have to be in order to appear on her canvas. This is not to read Gentileschi's painting autobiographically, or as a testimony to her inner world, but rather to see in the inner world of any individual, the potential and the space for any other. As Pollock also noted, a painting happens not only in the studio when it is made, but in the present with every encounter.

Cosima zu Knyphausen's recent paintings are full of trepidation. She repeats Lasterstein's compositions over and over again, or gives it a shot with her own Rosa, only to go back to Laserstein, or vice versa. One picture I saw in the studio was a blank canvas leaning against a window. Another I mistook for upside-down trees, but it was the naked Traute, again, but become increasingly blurry for zu Knyphausen's manic attachment to the motif.

Say, following Pollock and Baer's conversation, that this has little to do with a fear of the violence of the gaze, and more with an awareness of the dynamic set into motion by a painting; what it contains of others, and of yourself. What's most interesting about Laserstein's work is the intensity of the relation that it portrays; how confidently the artist leads her model across the canvas, holding her tight around the waist. It would be a bad idea to try to beat the master at her own butch game, so zu Knyphausen does the opposite, but to a similarly dynamic effect. In her works, we see love, devotion, desire, even the notion of the portrait as such, pictured as a stutter rather than an assertion; an open-ended enquiry that has itself as Leitmotif. If the worst thing in the world is to see yourself fall apart through the eyes of your lover it is because it contains two deaths in a single glance. Two people become one bundle – free fall. But zu Knyphausen und ihr Modell are playing humorously, breathlessly on the edge. Neither safe nor sorry.

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