Nadia Lichtig

Memory Gardens

Exhibition: 17.9 — 5.12.2018 / Mo—Fr 10am—3pm



A conversation between Nadia Lichtig and Monica Meyer-Bohlen

MMB The exhibition entitled MEMORY GARDENS at the Hanse-Wissenschaftskolleg gives an insight into the entirety of your artistic works. It revolves around a collection of series, each of which is subsumed under a title, such as *Pictures of Nothing*, *Headless*, or *Memory Gardens*. In essence, you always focus on 'translations', on processes that transcend media such as painting, text, sound, and performance. Before we take a closer look at the complexity of your artistic oeuvre, I would like to ask you about what decisions you make as you approach a specific work. Could you describe your motives, or what really drives you?

NL Painting and its translation forms in other media provide me with a sort of space for thought and distance. By distance, I do not mean 'cold distance', but rather in the Aby Warburg sense, a space that makes it possible to deal with fears by creating forms. It is about an activity that creates a relationship to the world, a relationship between the object that I create, the spectator and myself. Painting can be such an activity, and so can a ritual or a dance, children do so as they play. This creation of form can be abstract, or it can also deal with daily activities. For this reason, the differences between various artistic forms do not strike me as very fundamental. With regards to memory and remembrance, my works deal

primarily with forgetting and repression, and thus also with a lack of remembrance and the deformation of memories. In this context, I draw partly from personal experience, but certainly concentrate on the form, the process of coming to terms with experience; I am interested in that which the memory cannot find, and what forms take shape from this.

MMB If I understood you correctly, you are driven by questions of the mind, of the essence of thought, of consciousness and the unconscious, and in this context, you are especially interested in the empty spaces of memory. I find this quite fascinating, as you appear to be hunting the illusion of certainty. Let's look at your series with the curious title *Pictures of Nothing*. This series was created through a process of media transformation, including works with translucent colour gradients that appear transparent at the threshold where the invisible meets the visible, an effect that has been compared with the late atmospheric works of William Turner and Claude Monet. How did you approach these works?

NL In *Pictures of Nothing* (2013 - ongoing, sound, oil on canvas, goldleaf on paper, digital print), I refer to an archive of letters that come from both personal and acquired collections. These letters are in different languages, including languages that I only understand partially or not at all. I take words and phrases from these letters and use them to create soundscapes, which I construct and record using my own voice and an audio looper. These soundscapes are the starting point for large format paintings that begin with graphic representations of the words that were used for the soundscapes. These images are an attempt to visually and synesthetically portray the musical character of the word combinations sung in the recordings. Afterwards, I 'seal' the letters used as a template by covering them in gold leaf. What is important here is not the documentary character of the letters, but rather the process of appropriating words as music and their subsequent transformation into painting. This process of painting implies an understanding of painting as a psycho-social space, a space that is also temporal. It corresponds to the understanding that music and painting are closely related.

MMB The development process that you describe shows that in addition to the indispensability of conceptualisation and designation, one wants to understand things in terms of their own logic, but it becomes clear that linguistic meanings are by no means fixed, for the meaning of words shifts with their use. Their semantics can hardly be controlled. A century ago, the Dadaists, rejecting the society of their time, already recognized the inadequacy of words in their multimedia art, pointing out the limits of the words themselves, thus making room for the paradox, the contradiction. For John Cage, who was also interested in painting, language, and Zen Buddhism in addition to composing, and for whom the boundaries of individual art disciplines were famously too narrow, the musical qualities of language come all the more to the forefront as he dissolves them.
Let's get back to memory. The term is explicitly stated in the title of the series *Memory Gardens*. What kinds of transformation have led to these works?

NL In *Memory Gardens* (2010 — ongoing, acrylic on canvas, sound, digital printing) I am interested in the historical transformation process of memory and generational change, especially among the generation of Holocaust survivors. In this series, my grandmother's stories about her escape from the concentration camp are captured in painted sketches, which I then expand upon as prints. The colours of both the paintings and the prints have a fictional character; the sweet-and-sour palette underscores the deformed quality of this memory into a sort of story that I like to remember, as it was passed on to me through my grandmother's voice.

MMB Your comments about *Memory Gardens* make the subjectivity of perception in its complexity very clear using the example of historical themes.
You describe how your grandmother's voice had a positive effect on you as the recipient of her description of factually tragic historical events. Here it becomes apparent that your imagination serves as a background and mixes with the actual communication of historical facts, which you transpose several times - first into coloured paintings, and then these in turn into prints. Does the series *Headless* incorporate similar translation processes?

NL In the series *Headless* (2013 - ongoing, sound, print, ink and charcoal on canvas, wall paper), I start with my synesthetic perception of a voice, 'translating' paintings into prints, which I then paint. In this translation process, the starting point is the memory of a voice; when one recalls someone's voice, the person thus evoked acquires a frightening physicality. From a synesthetic point of view, I see voices more or less as coarsely rasterised fabrics, nets that cover things, objects, the ground, and are more or less invasive. This series could be seen as a series of portraits in which I do not give the individual pictures a title. Just as with *Pictures of Nothing*, the point is not the documentary character of the works, but the transformation process itself.

MMB And is this also what the work *Ghosttrap* is about?

NL The series *Ghosttrap* (2006 - ongoing, performance, silkscreen print, light, timer, photography) is about how general fears are captured and visualized as archaic images in the form of night-time landscapes. For this I collect interviews—people tell me about their fears, which I then 'translate' into long-exposure photographs. Because it takes place at night, this kind of photography entails many uncertainties, as I see nothing or much less than the camera during my shots. For me, these photographs exemplify what Walter Benjamin called the 'optical subconscious', a process that I equate with painting.

MMB In the context of the nocturnal creation process you described, with all its uncertainties, and in its results, these works strike me as a single metaphor for the hard-to-control part of human nature, which is impenetrable, deeply imprinted upon our existence, and for which one searches in vain for explanation.
Now at the centre of this exhibition is a particularly poetic work, an installation that you have entitled *Parfum d´Oubli*.

NL *Parfum d'Oubli* (2016 — ongoing, hermetically sealed

glass balls, fragrance, dried plant, printed fabric, text) consists partly of a fragrance extract of a plant that causes forgetfulness enclosed in glass spheres. The plant is the lotus plant mentioned by Homer in Chapter 9 of the Odyssey, which seduces some of Odysseus's soldiers into no longer wanting to travel home, as eating the plant appears to make them forget their country. This series consists not only of the glass balls in which the scent of this plant is hermetically sealed, but also of a printed fabric on which these glass balls are displayed on the horizontal surface of a display case. The print has a rasterized pattern similar to the *Headless* series, which is magnified by the optical effect of the spheres acting as a magnifying glass, thus creating optical 'holes', 'memory holes' on the horizontal picture. The series is accompanied by a text, a fiction —introspections written from the point of view of this plant.

MMB You have previously stated that 'art is thinking through actions and forms', forms that break open and transcend the cages of the individual media, and, it seems to me, with the conviction that 'each art accomplishes something that the other cannot' (John Cage). The interplay of painting, drawing, language, writing, sound, and installation is the design principle of all your artistic work, opening your minds to relationships other than those that are usually perceived. The way you transgress barriers makes room for a dynamic that constantly renews itself and provides an inexhaustible potential for stimulation, and so the focus shifts back to the lotus plant and into an unknown future.....

NL For me, artistic work is the creation of a space in which chaos can break loose. My aim is to always keep this space open... images can be created in this space. To live in the world, to find one's place in the world, also entails creating connections through a visualisations. The text you are referring to, is a journey through the history of planet Earth from the point of view of this lotus plant. This story is about constant transformation and constant new beginnings.

Here is the last chapter:

The Homogenocene

Much of the Earth's biodiversity will have disappeared by this time. Due to my extraordinary adaptability, I will be one of the few species to have survived the most recent mass extinction. This age will be marked by a high degree of homogeneity, and so this era will logically be called the Homogenocene. The enormous mass of my fermenting fruits will form a geological layer. My organic material residues will first overlap in a relatively undecomposed form, and then, due to the massive accumulation of organic compounds and other soluble components, form an organic layer that will evenly cover the earth. This organic layer will infiltrate the water and the few other plants that will grow on it with my chemical compounds. This era will therefore also be known as the 'Amnesiac Era', as my genetic and pharmaceutical properties will completely permeate the soil of the earth with my beneficial and soothing medicinal qualities. By eating the plants that will grow on this soil, the few highly aggressive 'superspecies', which will include humans, rats, cats, cockroaches, and myself, will experience a change in character. The extreme concentration of my active ingredients in the water and biomass will be absorbed into every possible food for living beings. This will lead to gradual, progressive changes in the brains of these animals. Especially in the case of mammals, my active ingredients will actively block stress hormones in the brain. At this point, most of the survivors will have similar characteristics; my chemical agents will have caused varying degrees of amnesia and memory loss in all living beings, leaving them in a state of mental confusion. But this will not be the end of evolution or nature. It will only be a point of repetition within a long, violent cycle in the course of which I myself will have forgotten everything. This is as far as my memory reaches....

Nadia Lichtig, visual artist, born in Munich and working and living in Montpellier, South of France. Fellow at the Hanse-Wissenschafts-Kolleg from September to December 2018.

Dr. Monica Meyer-Bohlen, curator at Hanse-Wissenschafts-Kolleg.

