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Norbert Prangenberg — Thomas Schütte

The exhibition which has just opened at the Skulpturenhalle in Neuss is devoted to Norbert Prangenberg, who died in 2012. It is not widely known that Prangenberg deserves credit for bringing ceramics back into fine art, a genre that had long been frowned on as a mere decorative craft. The master ceramicist Niels Dietrich built the first kiln for him in the early 1980s in his studio near Krefeld. This was the forerunner of Dietrich's famous workshop in Cologne.



However, drawings were the initial focus of Prangenberg's work; the simple shapes to be seen on the sheets are areas left blank on a black ground, sometimes not actually drawn, but arising as cut-outs in the paper. This approach at first sight might appear gauche, and yet the drawings are executed with dream-like certainty. In his paintings, Prangenberg preferred watercolours, which he used to create a transparent ground, to oil painting. Then he worked over this with pastel crayons. He drew while crouching on the floor, so that the orientation of the forms, surrounded by clusters of looping lines, remains open. The immaterial shine of the pigments produces a strangely hovering surface.



In his ceramics, Prangenberg also went in search of simple forms with nothing premeditated or contrived about them. At an angle to the rings of clay out of which the standing figures are formed, he inserted round floral elements unfurling rather like a fan, which attract attention to the glazed surfaces. The recumbent figures are covered in a glaze complete with indentations and punctuations, making the surfaces appear like membranes mediating between outside and inside. The figures have now come to rest on the grassy area around the Skulpturenhalle, but not in order to propose any correspondence between their organic shapes and natural forms, remaining beholden only to themselves and thus just as foreign in a natural as in an architectural setting. In his final years, Prangenberg made small sketchy ceramic pieces. In parallel, he painted small-format oils with a chaotic colour scheme that provides a framework for the imaginary figurative scenes.



In the summer of 2012, I met Thomas Schütte at the Musée National de Monaco, in order to prepare the exhibition "Houses" with him. This was devoted to the architectural models that he had made over the years. A book was published by Richter Verlag, Düsseldorf, in which these works were documented and reviewed for the first time. In those days, a few collectors had already had models built true to scale. At the end of the book, I discussed whether the essential features inherent to the models — the elegiac atmosphere on the one hand and the satirical barb on the other — are still palpable in the actual buildings. These qualities are clearly maintained. However, the undertone of doubt about the built world does not seem obvious in a real object that is in use.



Schütte continued to work on the models and, as we know, the artist himself commissioned a Skulpturenhalle on the basis of one of these. In this one, Schütte's architectural and sculptural motifs and ideas manifest themselves in an exemplary manner at various levels. It is an artist's house, both a place of reflection and for action, as it has hosted regular exhibitions devoted to sculpture for some seven years. On the occasion of Schütte's exhibition at the Museum De Pont in Tilburg, the book "Houses II" was published, which presents eighteen architectural projects from recent decades. I wrote the accompanying texts, in order to clarify, model by model, what is special about Schütte's approach. It is fundamentally important that he does not see himself as an architect, but as someone who models pictures. The models are visual representations of existential situations, they demonstrate possible ways of being in the world, observing what is going on for real and finding a suitable response. It is no coincidence that, among the models, one finds different versions of the temple or of the pavilion-with-a-view, as places of retreat, of coming to one's senses and for contemplation. While it is true that the models are there to be seen, actually, they themselves are instruments of observation.

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