

Crisscrossing Wonderland

(From the catalogue “Bad Luck”, Gallery Deschler, Berlin, 2009)

By Martin Oskar Kramer

‘Curiouser and curiouser!’ cried Alice (she was so much surprised, that for the moment she quite forgot how to speak good English); ...
... and in a very short time the Queen was in a furious passion, and went stamping about, and shouting: ‘Off with his head!’ or ‘Off with her head!’ about once in a minute.

(Lewis Carroll, *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, Chapter II and VIII)

So she was burnt with all her clothes,
And arms and hands, and eyes and nose;
Till she had nothing more to lose
Except her little scarlet shoes;
And nothing else but these was found
Among her ashes on the ground.

(Heinrich Hoffmann, *Slovenly Peter*: “The Dreadful Story of Pauline and the Matches”)

All good artists are alchemists in their hearts: in a process of mysterious metamorphosis consisting of a succession of mixing, combining, kneading, forming, polishing, molding, shaping, brewing, fermenting, weighing, measuring, tasting, refining, they create from heavy matter, from dreary lead, the sparkling “gold” of their works, that is to say a construct that extends far beyond mere matter into the realm of the spirit and the imagination. This is especially true for Patricia Waller, and the result of her acts of transformation are particularly unexpected and surprising. Maybe this is due to the fact that her starting point is a material and a technique—wool and crochet work—that carry very conventional bourgeois associations. Waller, however, by adding a hearty dose of venom and bile and an unerring sense of the absurd—who else would create teddy bears as Siamese twins!—manages to blend it into an especially vile concoction. Vile enough indeed for us to consider replacing the term “alchemy” by that of “witchcraft!”

It is no accident, of course, that the title of one of her latest work groups, “Crossing Wonderland,” alludes to Lewis Carroll’s famous children’s book for both children and adults alike, *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*. The subterranean fantasy world that Alice enters when she falls into the rabbit hole and that is revealed as a dream at the end of the book, is a world in which the imagination runs amok. Inhabited by strange and anthropomorphic creatures—mostly animals, but also playing cards—normality seems suspended here in favor of a world ruled by paradoxes, absurdities, reversals, contradictions, chaos, condensations, and strange detours. Decades before Sigmund Freud postulated his theory of the subconscious (later *id*) it found perfect literary expression in Carroll’s book. Waller’s procedure follows a similar logic, but she adds a “healthy” lacing of malice to the whole. Her crocheted creatures lure us into a world of their own, a world of fairy tales in which the

wondrous comes true and yet where nothing is ever quite as it seems. It is a world in which mice and cheese, their arms folded, sit peacefully across from each other, as if they had taken respite from their old game of eating and being eaten. The proverbial pearls are cast before three little pink swine wearing pointed carnival hats, and the bird in the hand makes us peer for the other two in the bush. By dissolving the difference between the literal sense and the metaphorical or figurative meaning of the proverbs and idiomatic expressions that she has given shape in her objects she utilizes one of the principal mechanisms at work in dreams, an alternative logic by which dreams form chains of associations and create stories full of unexpected twists and turns. Yet by the mere fact that these figures are en-tire-ly made of crochet-work, they already hover ambivalently on the threshold between literal interpretation and metaphorical ex-pression. In short, the elf emerging from the snail-shell beckons us into a wonder-land that is certainly no less whimsical, multi-layered, and intelligent than the one Alice entered through the rabbit hole.

Another characteristic trait Waller's objects share with *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* are the frequent changes of scale. In Carroll's book Alice spends a good part of the story either growing very large or rapidly shrinking, usually after the consumption of certain foods or drinks. If we only see images of Waller's works, as in this catalogue, we are likely to expect rather small objects. In that case, however, we will often be struck by their size when encountering them in an exhibition. To be mistaken about the size of works of art we know only through illustrations is, of course, quite a common occurrence (since most of us tend to ignore the dimensions given in the captions). In Waller's case, however, this is no mere oversight. In fact, it seems part of the program, and its effect is twofold. To cite just one example: the elf in the snail-shell first astonishes us by its size, for the elf is the size of a grown woman. It is only when we take a closer look at the enormous snail-shell that we realize that the opposite is the case, namely that it is us, the viewers, who have been reduced to the size of the elf, just as it happened to Alice in Wonderland. The same goes for the rubber ducky. The beholder will be quite amazed that the yellow ducky, which usually fits comfortably into the palm of his hand, goes up to his chest. Like a Lilliputian he will err among the slaughtered stuffed animals from the series "How To Kill Your First Love:" the dis-carded doll pierced through the chest by a pair of scissors, the teddy bear whose head is being sawn off, the monkey who is hanging by his hand nailed to the wall. For the size of these objects does not correspond to any exterior reality but only to their importance in the world of imagination.

The depiction of anthropomorphic animals has a long history, of course, extending far beyond Carroll all the way to the origins of literature, and has remained very common up to the present day. From the myths and fables of antiquity, the fairy tales of past centuries, up to modern comic strips and cartoons, animals are used to represent humans, often exaggerating and caricaturing certain character traits. Waller does not create new characters but resorts to those already in existence in popular culture. (The characters from the 19th-century German children's book *Struwwelpeter* depicted in a number of works have to be included here, even though they are not animals.) But because they are placed in a different context and at the focus of our attention, they appear in a new light. Common to them is the fact that they have all suffered acts of violence, and again a lot of blood has been spilled. Blood, collecting in dark red crocheted puddles beneath these hapless creatures, is in fact a

theme recurring again and again in Waller's work. It is safe to say that it has become an almost indispensable ingredient in her magic elixir. And it rarely fails to have a strong impact, for element of blood not only builds on a long tradition in Western art and culture, but also always has a powerful symbolic and emotional effect extending into various spheres, always resulting in an intensification. Just think of blood ties and blood brotherhood, but above all consider the essential Christian cult of transubstantiation, where red wine is symbolically transformed into the blood of Christ and drunk by the disciples and followers.

The sufferings of the innocent victims in Waller's art does suggest a comparison with the Passion of Christ—Jesus nailed to the cross and bleeding—even though Waller's art is obviously not motivated by religion. In combination with the often emotionally impassive faces of the tortured creatures—this, too, is a frequent feature in comic strips—we can read the profuse bleeding as an expression of an inner pain, as a resigned acceptance of the forever recurring failure and the ultimate impotence of mankind in the face of the overwhelming forces of fate. This is, of course, most obviously the case in the series "Bad Luck." The accident that "always befalls someone else" has occurred. The viewer is torn between malevolent gloating and empathy, between the pleasure of destruction—who has not at some point wished for the wolf to finally devour Little Red Riding Hood?—and compassion for these symbols of the helplessness we all experience in the presence of destiny.

Not all of the objects, however, depict cases of merely passive bad luck, a lot exhibit a very active malice. For beneath the seemingly naïve world of crocheted fairy tale creatures and idiomatic phrases come true there always slumbers a sub-liminal cruelty, ready to spring to life and raise its bloody head at a moment's notice. Let us not forget that most fairy tales include acts of amazing violence, and that the child in all of us is not only capable of marveling at the world and creating new ones, but also of brazenly and lustfully destroying it. In this aspect the imagination of the child, much more so than that of the adult, is still closer to that of the subconscious, for the latter—the *id* in late Freudian terminology—has not yet been as successfully repressed into its subterranean position by acquired cultural conventions and the process of socialization, in other words: by the formation of the *super-ego*. The 19th-century German children's book *Der Struwwelpeter (Slovenly Peter)* by Heinrich Hoffmann (whose 200th birthday is commemorated this year) is an interesting case in point. For the intention of the book is the very formation of the *super-ego*—by weaning children from sucking their thumbs ("The Story of Little Suck-a-Thumb"), playing with fire ("The Dreadful Story of Pauline and the Matches"), hyperactivity ("The Story of Fidgety Philip"), inattention ("The Story of Johnny Look-in-the-Air")—but to this purpose it employs a very child-like point of view. The cut-off thumbs of Conrad or Pauline's death by fire, as punishments for such trivial offences as thumb-sucking or playing with matches, might seem shockingly inappropriate and harsh, but make no mistake about it: for children they will seem perfectly logical. Just think of the willingness with which children, when playing, kill off even their favorite figures. That the Queen of Hearts in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* would invariably shout "Off with his head!" at the slightest provocation, is not at all far-fetched in this regard. For the sense of proportion is one of the functions of the *super-ego*. And as such it is very dependent on the respective culture, and it is acquired quite late in the development of the individual.

The intended audience of Waller's perfidious objects, however, is obviously not children but us adults. Her black humor is a means to shine a torch into our own psychological chasms. And just as in the largely unexplored abysses of the oceans, these are depths within which, free of all value judgments, the bizarre and the marvelous mingle with the beautiful and the terrible. Just as in fairy tales, Waller's objects often play with the topic of "eat or be eaten." In the series "Accidents" this is obvious, but the works from the series "Bad Luck" (an ironic title along the lines of the saying "The laugh is always on the loser") are in a similar vein: stock pot, fork, meat grinder, and chopper all denote slaughter for food. Some objects, on the other hand, also demonstrate how gluttony—representative for greed and excessive desire in general ("Strange Desires" alludes to another form of desire, the bulldozed teddies could be interpreted with reference to the exploitation of nature and the depletion of its resources)—can be fatal for who is ruled by it: the two dogs, one flattened by an oversized bone, the other with his head stuck in a food can, the rabbit impaled by a carrot. Where mouse and cheese sit across from each other, we might wonder what is going on. Have they become friends? Their postures with arms crossed suggest that the situation is not quite as relaxed: this is a deceptive peace. It looks more like some kind of cease fire negotiation, without guarantee that the mouse will not in the end devour the cheese anyway if it feels like it.

Waller's crocheted objects raise uncomfortable questions with regard to the way our society deals with violence: the violence we experience, the violence we exert, and the violence we love to consume. How rapidly and completely cultural structures can collapse and moral barriers be lifted, and people transform from peaceful neighbors to merciless war criminals, is demonstrated in regular intervals by the civil wars fought on this globe of ours, not just in geographically and emotionally remote Africa, but also here in oh so cultured Europe, not to mention our own German history of the last century. But we do not even need to refer to such extreme situations. In Carroll's book the three gardeners still had to be saved by Alice from the fury of the decapitation-loving Queen of Hearts. As Waller's series ironically entitled "Happy Gardening" demonstrates, these same gardeners are quite capable in their own right of "striking" acts of cruelty. In order to defend the home-grown salad or the precious flowerbed they might easily, in blind fits of rage, bestially murder other living creatures, and not just snails or insects. There is only a thin line dividing the lofty from the ridiculous (as the evolution of the meaning of "pathetic" demonstrates): in the same manner the sublime can all too easily mutate and turn into the barbaric. Man, this most dangerous predator on this planet, is also the only living being who kills far beyond his biological needs, and again and again out of pure pleasure. The violence depicted by Waller is subject to our libidinal drives. And in a similarly driven manner the tortured creatures rise again and again, in a Sisyphus-like "eternal recurrence of the same"—just as in comic strips and cartoons, but also in the manner in which Christ has to die on the cross for our sins again and again, and life reborn, in Hinduism or Buddhism, leads to new cycles of suffering. They rise again after each catastrophe, only to face the next inevitable disaster, pitilessly to the tune of that old maxim: "The show must go on."

Still, in conclusion we have to point out that Waller, in clothing her malevolent and frequently quite pessimistic objects in innocuous crochet work, at times unfortunately falls prey to her own deceptiveness. Even though we quickly see through her ruse, we the beholders—mostly

out of self-preservation and laziness—all too easily and willingly succumb to it. The fact that her works are often glibly categorized as “cute” or—not much better—as good for a laugh, makes the artist feel somewhat uneasy. “I am quite a wicked person,” she protests against this inclination to judge her objects to be harmless, though she might be at least in part responsible for it. Maybe she will just have to increase the dose of venom and bile—again!