

Chen Xiaodan – BLOOM!

Exhibition of the virtual-visual association in the machine hall at the Zeche Fürst Leopold,
Dorsten, June 5–15. August 2016

You don't look over the work of Chen Xiaodan all at once, there is no complete work at all, you only see parts of it. In the building of the former colliery, bones are grouped here and there between the old equipment. If you look closer, small shapes bloom on the surfaces, white dragonflies and butterflies, pearls or gray-pink flowers. Everything is made of porcelain - including the matt white bones. When you arrive in the machine hall, delicate curtains made of thin linen shimmer in front of four large windows and strips of rice paper with blackish, brittle round shapes hung on top of each other in their central axis. They are large, dried lotus leaves, on the last window there are seed pods of the lotus flower. The leaves are grouped in twos, then alone, and finally in threes; the seed pods are unmanageably numerous, which corresponds to a Chinese conception of numbers. An X-shaped cross made of small porcelain bones, some of which are gold-plated, spans the entire surface of each curtain. In the center of the hall hangs a huge bone structure made of matt silver aluminum above the historic steam engine: two bones connected by a joint. In the two rear windows one discovers dark branches with white porcelain efflorescence, one time dragonflies, the other time flowers. The little bones here are charred blackish. In the second machine room, dirty, reddish, soft, bulging surface strips crawl over the machine and furnishings. They are immediately reminiscent of large areas of skin; sometimes a face or a bulge can be seen. These are remnants of silicone molds; originally they were used to enclose any sculptural shape to be cast. They look like hides - more like their insides. You not only look at it, you also feel it. This strong and inevitable sensation is heightened by the innumerable shiny silver safety pins that pierce the silicone skin and point outwards at the viewer with their open tips. At the same time, they create a delicate, aesthetic glitter and sparkle. To European eyes, all the three-dimensional structures, the bones and skins scattered around the room, appear extremely strange. You not only see that the contexts designed are unusual and puzzling, but you can also feel that they are different. The European idea of a sculpture is still determined by the classical Greek conception of figures: the sculpture stands as a complete whole in front of the viewer: as an individual figure with an exciting balance of skeleton, muscles and other organs. It has an inner center and also occupies the center of our field of vision.

In China, the unity of a work of art turns out to be something entirely different. The army of clay warriors from 210 BC does not consist of individual bodies that are considered for themselves. In fact, they weren't even made to be looked at, they are grave goods. Chinese ink painting also does not represent closed objects, but rather hints and transitions. One wanders with one's gaze along the movement traces of the ink brush, which rather outlines the motifs, which often disappear in the white of the rice paper. Similarly, in the exhibition, the gaze wanders over the numerous motifs, which are optically linked in a light way. There is no centrality, no vanishing point and no main motive. A particularly beautiful structure is hidden away, you can hardly find it: two black wings with a small, shiny golden bone hanging between them. If you go through a side door, you will find a similar motif again, now with white wings. A well-known book about Chinese art and culture is called *Ten Thousand Things* (by Lothar Ledderose). The Shanghai-born artist Chen Xiaodan emphasized in an interview that it would not correspond to her work if one were to define its message too clearly. It's more about transitions and redirections. The bones or the skins have something to do with strength as well as sensation, with stability as well as development. As a woman, it is particularly important to her to make the physical an issue. In fact, she composes not just visual forms, but physical sensations. We encounter a different body awareness here. Past and death do not form opposites to the present and life, but are in continuity with one another. Fragments of the body are mostly seen in Europe as a violation of the wholeness of the body, often as suffering and martyrdom. In the art of Chen Xiaodan, however, the fragmentary, the divided, the hardened and the dead always open up the possibility of development. The physical motifs, the bones, skins and flowers not only stand for dead rigidity, but they wander through the room, they dance up and down the windows, they move through the machine hall without controlling it or being controlled by it, in diverse and surprising encounters. The viewer is made to think a little further, to establish contacts and associations. It goes without saying that these contacts also extend to the historical rooms and machines. The large bone as a joint and as an image of tension and force connects with the huge steam engine and its pistons. The "skins" on the machines show vulnerability, but also a relentless effort and energy. The four windows also create a wandering view, you first see groups of three dark lotus leaves, then individual, then groups of two and finally many lotus pods. The work reflects a Daoist thought from the quote: "The sense creates the one. The one creates the two. The two creates the three. The three creates all things." It's a worldview about things - a migrating worldview.

A video ("Samsura") extends the associations even further - to petrified dinosaur bones, to coal mines, to the transformation of bones through heat (soften in boiling water, blacken with flames, char in the oven). Chen Xiaodan erected a small piece of her sculpture *Great Wall of China* on the gallery using the hundred-year-old bricks from the colliery building. And her paintings play

around the themes of skeletons, birds, claws, wings, lotus, stones ... with flowing and graphic strokes. "Bloom" - the title of almost all of Chen Xiaodan's works - means: "blossom".

Erich Franz