

Petra Levis – Sweets

Colorful Smarties, red-and-white-striped peppermint drops, elaborately decorated chocolates and petits fours – Petra Levis puts her sweet temptations on paper with the greatest of precision. For her recurring motifs, she draws on long years of “collecting” objects that catch her attention with their colors, shapes or ornamental qualities. Her pictures hence depict candy, milk, water, paper, or cups and mugs – all items that surround her in her daily life. Ordinary things, ephemeral, fleeting items are transformed into something extraordinary and permanent – something memorable. Born in Munich in 1961 to German-American parents, the artist paints her sugary delights with watercolors in dimensions larger than life. Thirteen Smarties can for example almost completely fill a 30 x 120 cm sized image. Each small detail is given equal weight in the picture; nothing is neglected or glossed over in her drawing and painting. The finest lines are rendered just as accurately as larger surfaces. Clear colors set the scene. The relatively dry application of the nuanced hues enables Levis to juxtapose differently colored surfaces without them flowing into each other. A realistic, extremely tactile representation of the different materials depicted results, which comes very close to *trompe l’oeil* (French for “fooling the eye”). Despite the illusionism of the image, the creative process remains perceptible, augmented by the various levels of abstraction and auto-referentiality of the painting. A subtle tension emerges between realism and abstraction.

Before she executes a single brushstroke, Levis first conceives the arrangement of forms and colors, the lines and contrasts, planning the pictorial composition down to the last detail. Nothing is left to chance, including the fall of light. Shadow, frequently dismissed as a secondary element, takes on a special significance in Levis’s works. One could almost say that she manipulates the light to create distinctive forms and emphasize the pictorial space. She places her objects on smooth, slightly dulled surfaces, which creates a somewhat blurred reflection. The play of light and dark is thus carried to extremes. Mirrors and reflections can be interpreted in ambiguous ways: a mirror is a symbol of (self-)knowledge, of reason, of clarity, but also of transience and vanity – *vanitas*. Reflections frequently stand for confusion and blinding glare. And the word “reflect” can of course also mean to “think” or “ponder.”

American realism is one point of departure for Petra Levis. Pictures in this vein are oversized and frequently photo-realistic, whereby Levis explicitly distances herself from the latter because she paints only from the objects themselves, not from photographs. The “typical American” light and magical expanses in the work of Edward Hopper, for example, fascinate her.

Since the emergence of Pop art in the 1950s, with motifs taken primarily from everyday life, the consumer world and the mass media, artists have turned their attention to candy, sweets and chocolates as favorite subjects. Candy serves as a metaphor for childlike innocence, for sensual pleasure – but also for excessive consumption. The mass availability of candy starting in the second half of the 20th century makes the brightly colored sweet treats with their glowing colors and wide variety of shapes and patterns the ideal still life motif, which can be used to compellingly symbolize the desire for “sweetness” in both the literal and figurative sense. The artist Wayne Thiebaud, born in Arizona in 1920, re-established with his lush paintings of pieces of cake, lollipops and ice cream the nearly forgotten genre of the still life, now rendered socially acceptable with images of mass-produced sweets, the product of a modern society. Many contemporary artists also engage with such motifs: Peter Anton, for example, with his multilayered sculptures of boxes of chocolates, Emily Eveleth with her oversized donuts, or Günter U. Beier with his colorful paintings of chocolates, licorice and gummy bears, to name just a few figures working in a similar context to Petra Levis.

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