

Model worlds
On the work of Gabrielle Jennings

Colorfully spotted cows moo peacefully, pull up some grass and chew the cud. At first, the video portrait of happy livestock leads one to expect the camera to pan to "The Little House on the Prairie". Yet not even the city dweller can abandon himself to this idyll without a certain amount of distrust, and his suspicion is not unfounded: the camera, just barely set into motion, leaves the meadow and follows a tour of endless cattle-breeding grounds. Crushing boredom, as far as the eye can see. At the beginning of "eight minutes (prelude)" (1995), Gabrielle Jennings convicts the viewer of his stereotypical expectations with a minimum of effort. She confronts him with the relativity of pictorial detail and with the conditionality of mediated information.

The 31-year-old artist just concluded a residency at the Künstlerhaus Bethanien. Her birthplace is San Francisco, and she lives and works in Los Angeles. Shaped by both de-industrialization and re-industrialization and by the related economic and social consequences, the megalopolis of Southern California has become a metaphor for the globalized city in the late 20th century. Its encroaching expanse, the auto-orientation, the coexistence and collision of various ethnicities characterize Los Angeles just as much the Hollywood film industry does. No wonder that there are those who would turn L.A. into the newest trend in the export of young art since London. Contributing to the formation of this mythology are lavish exhibitions like "Sunshine & Noir, Art in L.A., 1960-1997" in the Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg, where Jennings' work was represented within the context of the video program with "Momentary Suspension" (1995). And it doesn't even make much difference when the curator Lars Nittve admits that "geography [in the age of globalization, TM] is not a compelling reason for grouping together different artists [...]" and points to the heterogeneity of artistic production.

The examination of the illusory worlds of (not only) film and advertising has a particular standing in Jennings' work. Again and again, she completes the break between the subjective experience of reality and the reality constructed in

idealized children's images and reproduced in mass media. Her video piece "The Kiss", presented in the Kunsthalle Basel in 1996, satirizes the strenuous measurement and comparison of one's own identity with the touched-up and beautified idealizations produced (not only) in Hollywood and projected everywhere. Again and again, Jennings asks a couple to imitate the poses of models from well-known advertisements until the camera captures the recognizable perspective and the predetermined goal is edited in. Rubberneckers and the participants' concentration give an impression of the reality of the image. The artist's stage directions can be heard from off-camera, a method that was also used in "Momentary Suspension".

Besides these autonomous video pieces, amongst which Jennings' contribution to "Sampler 2" (1996) compiled by Diana Thater for the David Zwirner Gallery in New York can be counted, there are other works that are part of complex installations. The individual elements of "Parlor Pieces" (1997), in which monitors and video projections form integral components, generate a dense system of symbolic references. Miniatures of a three-piece living room suite, decorated with delicately ruffled fabric upholstery, are arranged around the central gap on the top side of a pedestal in "Parlor Grouping" (1997). The four-sided omission surrounds the hissing of an empty screen like a frame. Although the description seems strangely like a fussy reproduction of a doll house, in viewing the individual works it quickly becomes clear: the recovered form of presentation reduces the portrayal to the most elementary symbolic meaning. In so doing, the use of patterns in the various media is given a particular meaning. "Parlor Projection" (1997) consists of the enlarged and simplified cardboard imitation of the sofas and chairs from "Parlor Grouping", simulating now a perfect location for putting on the next children's birthday party. In fact, they just serve as a projection surface for a video whose only image shows without alteration the delicate pink flower pattern from the slipcovers of the miniatures. Nonetheless, this is a video and not a slide show. A decisive element that refers to the possibility of change, but voluntarily gives preference to the redundancy of the pervasive hissing in the living room.

With a similar function of layering meaning, patterns also appear in the video piece "A Small Fortune" (1996), which was developed during a fellowship stay at 200 Gertrude Street Artists' Spaces in Melbourne, Australia. Jennings is in a costume storage room and starts dressing up as a fairy. Alternating on the bottom border of the picture are the macro shots of structures and drawings similar to the fabrics and materials she is covering herself with: gowns, veils, angel's wings. In the divided picture, the narrow strip of abstract forms and patterns comments on the narrative structure running above it. The play with patterns and projections that recurs in all media in Jennings' work has to be understood metaphorically and takes advantage of the suburban camouflage of an orderly life that anxiously anticipates the norm. This protects her from the absolute functionalism in the sense of the art system. Jennings' art is just as nonspecific to L.A. as it can't be identified as "typically feminist", due to her occupation with the motifs of childlike picture language. By means of metaphor, she underscores the social strategies of the construction of reality. In the finest sense maliciously Swiftian, the overview of Jennings' miniaturized image worlds bears the openness that allowed both of the first parts of "Gulliver's Travels" to be turned into children's books.

Tabea Metzel
Translation: Heather Fleming

BE Magazine
Berlin
1998