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Lois Renner

BY JÖRG HEISER

The artist's model is his studio; in miniature, that is. It is roughly the size of a television set, and was copied from his old studio (the staircase, the column, the sloping roof, the radiator, the large windows in the rear wall) in his home town, Salzburg. He has been working on these features for about five years now in his new studio in Vienna. He has sawn them up, extended them, rebuilt them, constantly fitted new furniture and equipment (ladders copied with meticulous precision, screw-clamps, waste-paper baskets etc.) and then taken them all out again. The various stages of this process are observed by an eight by ten inch plate camera, which can focus to the precise millimetre (the foreground is blurred, only this copy of a chair in the centre is absolutely sharp) to create a world of depth, which is then blown up to the size of a panel picture and back-printed onto perspex. This could all be very glossy - something floating in front of the gallery wall like a futuristic monitor. But crude screws have been thrust through the picture in unpredictable places, as if the stasis were off balance in some mysterious way, and these screws crush the picture against the wall.

'We come from a long line of studio studies', these pictures seem to be saying at first, then they add: 'you have to be aware of the

illusions we convey'. Perhaps we need a word to classify Lois Renner's work: how about studio-model-conversion-photography? It is tempting to try to fit them into an art-historical niche - perhaps Renner is even tempted to do this himself: he multiplies the planes of reflection and representation, a technique that was introduced by Velàzquez in a painting in which we can see him painting the Spanish King and Queen from the perspective of a model (in Les mots et les choses, 1966, Foucault derived a great deal of amusement from this depiction of Classical representation and the definition of space that it opens up); or in Courbet's The Artist's Studio... (1854-55) as a 'real allegory' of the incipient need to question such representations; or in Kurt Schwitters' Merzbau (c.1923), in which the artist's house began to mutate beyond itself in a rampant surge of do-it-yourself; and even Duchamp's Boite-en-Valise (1922), in which his Fountain (1917) turns up again in miniature form.

If it were left at that, then Renner's pictures would be art-about-art-history, a contribution to studio-picture culture and to the art of illusion, with the fleeting charm of mocking great sculptural deeds by using the dwarf format. But, in the most recent work in particular, Renner's model is about something much more far-reaching, for which art history is more a stage background than a principal character.

In earlier pictures dating from 1992 and 1993 the picture still showed the studio as though the imaginary miniature artist had just popped out for some cigarettes, leaving his room to bask in the industrious but manageable untidiness of dust and shavings that just needed to be swept up to restore its pristine condition.

The earliest picture in the Berlin exhibition dates from 1994, and still has something of this essentially tidy quality, but it is impossible to overlook the fact that there has been an intervention in the space

depicted: a group of canvases has been arranged by the wall on the right; but, through a hole that has been ripped out of the back wall, a monstrous object painted red, and shaped rather like a boat, is thrusting into the middle of the studio. In the most recent works, which shimmer in a predominantly turquoise green colour that seems cosy at first but then turns ominous, it appears as though the control mania of the absent great artist has been overcome by almost earthquake-like echoes of his own violence: the floor is torn up, like tectonic plates hopelessly wedged against each other, or reveals fissures. While Gordon Matta-Clark's Splitting (1974) and Yoko Ono's Half a Room (1967) split houses and furniture in two in a way that was still quite clean, in Renner's case the room is sawn through in mockingly arbitrary, almost ornamental curves. Art makes itself independent and withdraws itself from its creator's ordering zeal.

Here the model is clearly not a prototype of interior decoration that may be imagined retrospectively but intended for the future, like many contemporary space-related works. Quite the opposite: the fantasy of meticulously planning and shaping worlds in which to live, an approach borrowed from architecture and design, falls apart and, like a mutant, turns against the studio from which it came into being. It came from within, as Cronenberg would say. All photography can do is follow this process stoically.

In a somewhat distanced analogy, this can be compared with the development of the pictorial world of Cindy Sherman: the shaping, controlling camera eye of the early film stills finds itself overrun from the edges by the later landscapes of puke and refuse. Similarly, in Jeff Wall's Destroyed Room (1978) the massacre is directed at the things, but is still aiming indirectly for the woman (the drawers that have been ripped open, the woman's clothing scattered everywhere); Renner finally banishes the male fantasy of the great artist - of using art to bring the model under his control -

into the Bonsai space of the room. Renner studied painting under Gerhard Richter, and anyone who has seen photographs of Richter's meticulously tidy, stately studio spaces and then thinks of his most recent series of mother and child portraits will recognise that perhaps this method is so very tempting because of the general implications it has for male artists: place something in the canonical order of art history, then you have something to hold on to, and thus negate the need to get involved with the social entanglements of art.

Translated by Michael Robinson

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