

CAROLINE ACHAINTRE

SHIFTINGS

10.4.-12.6.2022

Caroline Achaintre (*1969, FR/DE) works with different media such as tapestry, drawing and ceramics, which she combines in a conceptual as well as process-based way. She transposes traditional techniques into the present, exploring the boundaries between the abstract and the representational. Her ceramics and watercolours, as well as the large-format tapestries, allow animalistic-looking figures and mask-like formations to appear and create a playful and absurd atmosphere. Caroline Achaintre's first solo museum exhibition in Switzerland provides an insight into the memorable work of the German-French artist. It offers a glimpse of an artistic oeuvre that is characterised by precision, a pleasure in experimentation and unconventionality.

The exhibition title *Shiftings* alludes not only to the fact that Achaintre transfers traditional techniques such as tapestry or ceramics into the present, but also to her constant testing of the boundaries between abstraction and the figurative. Geometric, mask-like formations and wondrous, seemingly animalistic figures appear in her works, questioning our preconceived view and shifting classical classifications. The magic of Achaintre's hybrid creatures is hidden in their ambiguity, their beauty lies in their irritation.

Achaintre develops her powerful tapestries with the technique of tufting, in which individual wool threads are shot through the canvas from behind with the help of a pressure gun. Due to the varying length of the threads and their elasticity, the soft fibres mix and form a relief-like surface on which lines and colours flow into each other. Form, line and material combine to create a pictorial experience in which the recognisability and blurriness of the contours are in an effective field of tension and give free rein to associations. Both the colour and the material captivate with their independence and have an effect in their very own substance. The works seem like mysterious relics of an unknown culture and unfold both a strong physical and sensual presence. Achaintre's ceramics evoke associations with cell tissue, animal skins and masks, but also with human faces. Her intimate works on paper, on the other hand, are reminiscent of conundrums or the depth-psychological procedure of the Rorschach test. In many cases, various characters and multiple identities seem to populate her works.

Achaintre's sources of inspiration are images from both high and popular culture. In addition to art-historical reference points, including German Expressionism, Primitivism and the Arts and Crafts movement, the horror, heavy metal and science fiction genres are just as important to her as the subversive spirit of Central European carnival and Shrovetide customs. The lively, colourful and humorous characterise Achaintre's work as much as the archaic, dark and mysterious. On the border of the «uncanny» (Sigmund Freud), the strange can be discovered in the supposedly familiar; a tapestry becomes an animistic figure or wool becomes hair.

Parkett 2 Hallway

For the ceramics, the leather sculptures and the watercolours, Caroline Achaintre processes different influences. She finds inspiration in postmodern design, on record covers and in pop culture as well as in ethnography and art history. With her work titles, she creates free associations with mythology, fabulous creatures, animal names, music and literature, but also with visual impressions and her own word creations.

Many of her works are reminiscent of masks that suggest carnival and could come from different cultural contexts, or of face coverings used in secret societies. Such maskings make it possible to undermine social or societal power relations and to turn conventions and moral principles upside down for a short time. Particularly in historical carnivals, the baser aspects of human behaviour were emphasised (sex, eating and drinking, defecating) and the body, rendered grotesque by the dominance of the purely physical, became a symbol of excess and thus of rebellion against authority and strictness. In other words, carnivals make it possible to reflect on social power relations, but also on the relationship between the human and the non-human. Furthermore, they create a pagan connection to nature and to the dark forces in the mountains.

Achaintre's interest in the mask is then not only in folk ritual with extravagant and confusing comedy, but above all in the possibility of a double identity. Her works usually have multiple identities that coexist. This results in a kind of mental and visual interaction between the obvious and the indeterminate. From the beginning, Caroline Achaintre was concerned with the theme of the indeterminate and its effects on perception, especially in personality psychology: «The first drawings often reminded me of Rorschach tests, the psychological aspect of which interested me. I liked very much that they were figurative and abstract at the same time, so that the viewer could have the feeling that they were revealing something. It's a personal discovery and perhaps a reflection or projection of one's own thoughts onto something.» Invented in 1921 by the psychiatrist Hermann Rorschach, this instrument of psychological evaluation consists of a series of abstract and symmetrical drawings that can evoke different figurative forms such as a cloud, a puddle or a mass of rocks from which people, animals or maps can be read. The indeterminate and enigmatic aspect of the drawing opens up a variety of interpretative possibilities that allow each individual's personal projections to emerge.

Parkett 2 Room 1 (right)

“At Goldsmiths I started to make quite a lot of small ink drawings. [...] These drawings already had to do with the mask and the portraits, but also with the uncanny - in the sense of Freud, it's actually something familiar, but in a different context it's something that gets under your skin. [...] Something you already know, you suddenly see in a different light. I thought that if I was already working with the uncanny, a term which in German (das Unheimliche) contains the word for “home” (Heim) but also the word “homely” (heimlich), then it would be interesting to choose a material that comes from a homely context. That's how I came to wool,» says Caroline Achaintre.

Caroline Achaintre has been working with wool since the 2000s, including in her latest works *Alberich* (2022) and *Mercury* (2022). She says about her working material and the feel of the materiality: “Wool is a non-neutral material, and that's what I like about it. It has a temperature, it even has an aura, if you like; you can compare it to fur, to hair, and at the same time it can be attractive and repulsive.”

Parkett 2 Room 2

From her interest in varying volumes and the texture of material, ceramics emerged a few years after her first wool reliefs. Achaintre begins systematically with a thin layer of clay to guide the flat material into a three-dimensional form. She models the clay, cuts outlines and applies a structure and covers the surface with a glossy glaze. Mostly, however, the clay slabs are folded, corrugated or modelled into hollow bodies.

Occasionally, the artist combines clay and leather, as in *Trainierte Leberwurst* (eng. Trained Liver Sausage) (2011) or *Greem* (2012), where a mask of clay is superimposed on a bead of leather. The ceramics always take the form of a mask, helmet or face that is more or less tailored to the person. For this, two small holes are drilled into the clay, which automatically give the objects a look. This is also often the case with the reliefs. Sometimes discreet, sometimes a little more obvious, in this gaze lies a source of vitality that strangely resembles life. Certain of the ceramics suggest bondage practices as well as violence and vulnerability through their masking, shapes and leather elements.

Parkett 2 Room 3

With the title *Yeti* (2021), Caroline Achaintre directly references the huge, two-legged, hairy mythical creature of the Himalayas that found its way into popular culture and the world of comics. Whether snowman, mountain spirit, Tibetan bear or yet an unknown hominid species, the enigma of the Yeti remains similarly indeterminate as Achaintre's interpretation of Himalayan beliefs: her work can resemble a coat of fur with grey mittens and creates a coexistence of suit and characters.

Parkett 2 Room 4

Achaintre works with the technique of tufting. Thereby, wool threads are shot through the canvas from the back side with a tufting machine. The result only becomes apparent on the front - an interplay of visibility and invisibility. Achaintre's own imagination is challenged until she interrupts the working process, walks around the canvas and visually examines the emerging image. Like "pixels", Achaintre described the wool threads as carriers of individual pieces of information from which a new image is formed. Symbolically, the working process can be transferred to the interpretability of Achaintre's motifs: *Neptun* (2018) also releases chains of associations, appear familiar and uncanny and remains indeterminate.

Parkett 2 Room 5

"I like to be inspired by ethnological collections, the first objects of mankind, from prehistoric sculptures and illustrations to record covers of heavy metal bands. The uncanniness comes from the choice of motifs. They are mostly characters, portraits, faces or masks (...). Very often there is a coexistence of two creatures in one work. I am looking for a kind of conflict through a coexistence of multipersonality", says Caroline Achaintre. Starting from her drawings, the artist developed a pictorial language that also makes it possible for her tapestries to combine different beings in one and the same object, in other words, in a single body. In *Bat-8* (2018), for example, a bat and an octopus are represented at the same time. This synthesis is also reflected in the title, the bat and eight arms are an essential characteristic of octopuses. A skull shape can also be associated in the pink centre of the work, that could be interpreted as a shaman with an animal bonnet. The starting point for these hybrid characters are drawings in which several characters are combined to form a new being.

Passage Salle Poma

If you look at the ceramics scattered around the room on their metal stands, which resemble bodies, all kinds of (de)formed beings look back at you: with open mouths, eye slits, erect animal or devil ears, with metal rods that become teeth and surfaces that become snake or crocodile skins. Friendly, grim, blunt, amused, sceptical, threatening, ambivalent, sometimes more human, sometimes more animal. Achaintre pushes the phenomenon of pareidolia* to its limits, possibly to the point of animism, an "ensoulment" of things - and thus creates the dull feeling that in the midst of her works you yourself become the object of contemplation.

Caroline Achaintre achieves a rough, sometimes scaly appearance of the surface by means of a printing process. A relief is created by pressing a regularly patterned object, such as a doormat or a sixties wallpaper roller, into the clay. In combination with the glaze, the relief recreates a living skin image, recalls a reptilian shell, such as in *Fumingo* (2019), or look moist, «as if they had come up from the bottom of the sea», as the artist notes.

* Term for the recognition of faces and figures in objects and inanimate things.

Salle Poma

Thousands of small, relatively thick wool threads are bunched together, creating a surface that is dense, soft and silky, forming the 5 m wide and 3.50 m high tapestry *RoadRunner* (2022), which Caroline Achaintre created especially for the Salle Poma at Kunsthhaus Pasquart in Biel. Some threads are longer than others and fall gently over the lower layers, while mohair forms a bushy relief next to them. Due to the varying length of the threads and their elasticity, the soft fibres mix and form an uneven surface on which lines and colours flow into each other. The stimulating colourfulness, but also the seductive texture and haptics of the tapestry have both an attractive and repellent effect and evoke multifaceted associations, but at the same time elude clear attribution. Even if one occasionally believes to recognise what one sees, a ghostly shadow blends unnoticed into the form and opens up unexpected associations and similarities. Achaintre uses this blurring of boundaries as an artistic device to make perception oscillate between the expression of familiarity and a beguiling monstrosity.

The exhibition is a cooperation with the Kunstmuseum Ravensburg, GER.

Curators of the exhibition

Stefanie Gschwend, director ad interim Kunsthhaus Pasquart and Felicity Lunn

Publication

In cooperation with Kunstmuseum Ravensburg a publication with texts by Oriane Durand, Kristina Groß, Stefanie Gschwend / Ute Stuffer, Vanessa Joan Müller and exhibition views will be published by Verlag für moderne Kunst (ENG / FR / GER).

Artist's talk

Sat 9.4.2022, 4pm (dt) Caroline Achaintre in conversation with Stefanie Gschwend

Guided tours

Thurs 21.4.2022, 6pm (fr) Laura Weber, art historian

Thurs 19.5.2022, 6pm (dt) Stefanie Gschwend, director ad interim

Art at noon – Lunch with the Kunsthhaus team

Fr 3.6.2022, 12:15am (dt/fr) Short tour and lunch snack by *Batavia*, CHF 15.-, without snack regular entry, registration: info@pasquart.ch

Taste meets art – Restaurant Lokal @ Kunsthhaus Centre d'art Pasquart

Fri 10.6.2022, 6pm Apéro & Dinner, Menu by Restaurant Lokal, lokal-biel.ch
