

WAYWARDS

MARIA THURN
UND TAXIS

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The works presented here have been shown in the following exhibitions:
“Looking for Alice”, April/May 2016,
Ebensperger Graz;
“Waywards”, September/October 2016,
Ebensperger Berlin;
“The Beast Within”, February 2017,
Chalet Mittelgaessli, Saanen.

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« 2017 »

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and Ludger Paffrath
Edited by Gillian Osborne
Design by Elias Hanzer & Lucas Liccini
Set in Pantasia by Wei Huang
Printed in Germany on Munken Pure

King Jareth:
You remind me of the babe.

Goblin:
What babe?

King Jareth:
The babe with the power.

Goblin:
What power?

King Jareth:
The power of voodoo.

Goblin:
Who do?

King Jareth:
You do.

Goblin:
Do what?

King Jareth:
Remind me of the babe.

From Jim Henson's "Labyrinth", 1986

Who are these creatures? Are they good, are they evil, and how many are they if one can't even decipher how many are one? This catalogue lists portraits of 26 Waywards by Maria Thurn und Taxis made between 2015 and 2017. A happy-go-lucky but mischievous crew, its composite members were born from such source material as tribal masks, voodoo effigies, stuffed animals, totems, cartoons, puppets, fashion people, and kobolds. Devoid of any background or spatial perspective whatsoever, the paintings and drawings and their no-nonsense presentation of the characters are reminiscent of mug shots, making them all members of the same pack: a gang with dubious intentions. However, their cartoonish bodies, colourful humanoid garments and features are endearing. It is this ambivalence between the macabre and the artfully cute that call to mind the archetypical trickster who stabilises society by annoying it, and the court jester dressed in motley 'regalia', rejecting all appearances of law, justice, and moral illusions, but embracing honesty, lust – and comic relief.

The artist and publishers of this little book wish to thank Jane Neal for her essay, which sheds light on the obscure backgrounds of the Waywards, Lucas Liccini and Elias Hanzer for taming the creatures with their excellent catalogue design, Gillian Osborne for carefully editing the texts, and particularly the people and collections who have given the Waywards a home: Collection Feuerhake/Hiersemenzel, Berlin; Urs D. Gloor, Basel; N.&H. Jakse; Collection Köstlin, Berlin; the Leinweber-Wall family; the Heiß family; Dr. Helmut Marko, Graz; Dr. Erhard Perl, Vienna; the Roden family; the Roswitha Wille Collection, Berlin; Collection Roosen-Trinks, Berlin; as well as other private and corporate collections in Basel, Berlin, Geneva, Graz, Gstaad, Istanbul, Regensburg, Rougement, and Saanen.

Sebastian Hoffmann

“Sooner or later... one has to take sides if one is to remain human.”

Graham Greene,
The Quiet American

For some time now, the young German artist Maria Thurn und Taxis has been examining the role of masks with regards to identity. It is not simply a question of depicting the protagonists of her drawings and paintings wearing masks that disguise or exaggerate their personalities, but the act of transformation, and the effect this has on them and those who encounter them, which appears to intrigue her. Thurn und Taxis enjoys using her work to pose questions, but she paradoxically engages and frustrates us by encouraging us to turn these thoughts over, without offering an answer or a solution.

In one recent painting we find a figure dressed in a robe of cardinal red. The subject's pose and his dress suggests that he is indeed a cleric, but the face turned towards us is that of an elongated African tribal mask. The two distinctly different symbols jar and we withdraw, confused, only to look again and attempt to decipher a hidden narrative that might provide us with a 'way in' to the work. Time and again, Thurn und Taxis creates a status quo that allows for confusion. The figures that populate her paintings and drawings are attractive in a Baroque sense; that is, they fall between sensuality and excess, and between the carnivalesque and the grotesque. The subjects are also often brightly, even garishly coloured. Sometimes they stand alone, defiant against stark grounds of white or sky blue; at others they morph into strange totem-like hybrids: part animal, robot, and toy. A first glance at one of these 'hybrids' suggests something invitingly tactile, even sweet in a naive sense, but Thurn und Taxis quickly refutes this simplistic reading by leading us into the territory of Art Brut; reminding us of Dubuffet's search for an art form influenced

by ethnography but also one that reflected the simple life of the everyday human with all its inherent complexities, challenges, and suffering.

Thurn und Taxis talks of how her delicately rendered drawings, watercolours, and more robust, impastoed oil paintings are compiled through the collation of material that comprises anthropological journals, images sourced from current affairs magazines, and pulp pop culture. The hybrid creatures born from this *mélange* reflect the currents that run through the artist's own psyche, and the culture in which she herself grew up. She explains: 'I ask myself, what is it that makes me tick as a human being? What are the influences, traditions and belief systems that come together to form us, and what role does the media have in this mix and on how I make sense of the world?'

With the growing impact of social media and smart technology on our lives, the artist's questions point towards wider

ramifications—not only for individuals, but also for society and the world as a whole. That is: What does it mean to be human and are we even fully human anymore? The sense that we might actually be at risk of sacrificing our humanity is beginning to be a pressing concern. According to the writer and academic Martin Jacques, '[t]he very idea of what it means to be human—and the necessary conditions for human qualities to thrive—are being eroded.'

As far back as 2004, Jacques was arguing that three trends were starting to profoundly change the nature of our society. The first was the rise of individualism; the second, the relentless spread of the market into every part of society; and the third the rise of communication technologies, notably mobile phones and the Internet. Certainly we have readily allowed ourselves to contract out our private space, exposing the most intimate details of our lives on social media to people described as 'friends'—but most of whom we hardly know. We have become addicted to the approval of strangers and regularly sacrifice our

personal time and sometimes even real relationships in order to spend hours online. With insufficient time to think things through, we have little sense of perspective on the process of virtual communication.

It is surprising then—even shocking—when we pause to consider that we might be entering into a process of dehumanisation: a kind of unspoken agreement that recognises a two- (or three- or more) way dialogue, conducted behind masks (be they ‘real’ photographs of the user in their profile pictures or icons that function as substitutes, forged from cartoons, photographs, or other found material). Much has been written about people using the Internet to create new identities that conceal their true nature and age (and sometimes intent of the user). Despite this, it has now become common practice (perhaps at times adding a certain excitement) to engage in veiled, virtual exchanges.

Thurn und Taxis’ work could be interpreted as addressing this most contemporary of phenomenon. For the sober office worker, or the self effacing teenager, the virtual world can function as a nightly carnival, offering the freedom of disguise and the possibility of exploring new ways of being through newly forged identities.

This is only one possible reading of Thurn und Taxis’ practice, however. The figures and totems she creates form a bridge between ancient traditions, beliefs, and science fiction. Tribal masks sit atop automatons—personifications of artificial intelligence in imagined, future forms. There is something else here too. The mask and the totem have long been associated with shamanic practices, notably with portals between life and death, so we must also consider whether there is a spiritual angle to Thurn und Taxis’ figures.

Again though, the artist raises a question just as she answers another. The existential crisis that looms large when a human being considers the fact that she was born to die has historically resulted in melancholia, but also in attempts to make a mark and achieve lasting recognition. Sometimes this creates a tension between what the person in question wants to be versus what society dictates, and thus the psychological need for a mask to conceal not merely identity, but thoughts and actions, becomes paramount.

Thurn und Taxis has not restricted her investigations of this theme to the mediums of oil and watercolour. She has recently returned to filmmaking, producing compelling shorts that splice together cuts from pre-existing material, resulting in arresting and often entertaining new narratives. As with her two-dimensional work, it is Thurn und Taxis' keen eye for creating maximum impact through strange and surprising

juxtapositions that engenders a strong and complex reaction in the viewer.

It was the pioneering Russian film director Sergei Eisenstein who first demonstrated the aesthetic and ideological potential of the practice of 'montaging'. He believed that when two or more images were edited together, this would create a 'terbium quid,' that is, something that makes the 'whole' greater than the sum of its individual parts. Thurn und Taxis understands the power of this—not only in her films but throughout her practice. She constantly questions and pokes fun in a way that calls to mind the playful and colourful works of Nikki de Saint Phalle. Yet undergirding all of Thurn und Taxis' practice is an unmistakable tension. It is the tension that defines what it means to be humanly small thing at a time when being fully human, with all its dichotomies, is no longer privileged.

Jane Neal

1 Untitled III, 2015
Watercolour and pencil on paper
106 × 96 cm

2 Totem II, 2016
Oil on canvas
200 × 150 cm

3 Untitled, 2015
Oil on canvas
200 × 150 cm

4 Untitled IV, 2015
Watercolour and pencil on paper
37 × 28 cm

5 Untitled V, 2016
Watercolour and pencil on paper
37 × 28 cm

6 Untitled VIII, 2016
Watercolour and pencil on paper
61 × 46 cm

7 As I Was About to Say, 2016
Watercolour and pencil on paper
61 × 46 cm

8 Beastly, 2016
Watercolour and pencil on paper
37 × 28 cm

9 No Comment, 2016
Watercolour and pencil on paper
37 × 28 cm

10 Sunburn, 2016
Watercolour and pencil on paper
37 × 28 cm

11 Totem, 2015
Watercolour and pencil on paper
37 × 28 cm

12 Green Coat, 2015
Watercolour and pencil on paper
37 × 28 cm

13 Red Jacket, 2016
Watercolour and pencil on paper
61 × 46 cm

14 Sandrabbitt, 2016
Oil on canvas
150.5 × 120 cm

- 15 The Magi, 2016
Oil on canvas
150.5 × 120 cm
- 16 The Devil Wears Pink, 2016
Oil on canvas
50 × 41 cm
- 17 Ballet Legs, 2016
Oil on canvas
50 × 41 cm
- 18 Chicken Legs, 2016
Watercolour and pencil on paper
61 × 46 cm
- 19 Sunstruck, 2017
Watercolour and pencil on paper
37 × 28 cm
- 20 Untitled I, 2015
Watercolour and pencil on paper
106 × 96 cm
- 21 Untitled II, 2015
Watercolour and pencil on paper
106 × 96 cm

- 22 Do11 II, 2017
Watercolour and pencil on paper
37 × 28 cm
- 23 Do11 I, 2017
Watercolour and pencil on paper
37 × 28 cm
- 24 Memento, 2017
Watercolour and pencil on paper
37 × 28 cm
- 25 Untitled IX, 2016
Watercolour and pencil on paper
61 × 46 cm
- 26 Untitled VI, 2016
Watercolour and pencil on paper
37 × 28 cm



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