

The Invasion of the Anonymous Clothes

At first they hover, organic-amorphous entities, within or in front of black, white and sand-coloured spaces. Then they assume human shape, immediately to appear again in abstract form in front of monochrome backdrops. Eventually they themselves take over the backgrounds of their morphing figurations, until they ultimately unfurl themselves on the walls, ceilings, floors and facades of the architecture and urban structures which, in the meantime, have evolved and grown into the pictures, registering them as structural and functional elements, as if they had always been omnipresent: at the airport, in the car, in the underground, in the glass interior of the bank building...

These, the textile relics of the western clothing industry, which the Atlantic ocean agglomerates into soft fabric sculptures and spits out on the West African coast where Pauline Marcelle came across them about six years ago – astonished, puzzled and impressed at the same time. These elements of fabric and clothing have migrated from the coastline into the city in the course of the painting series *Bend Down Boutique*, initiated at that time by the artist. Since then, the series has grown into approximately 90 works. They have taken possession of the bodies and appearances of people, of their means and routes of transportation, their buildings, sites and living spaces. People do not seem to have perceived this as an invasion; they go about their business and customary activities unperturbed, as before, even if their exterior identifying characteristics and the structure of their surroundings have visibly changed: everything is now reduced in terms of colour to grey, black, white, red, blue or yellow, occasionally green or brown. There are hardly any in-between shades, never many different colours in one painting. The reduction of the colour palette corresponds to the reduction of the forms in the course of the progress of the artistic series: the organic, vegetal, and potentially variable withdraws from the total picture into detail. It blends into the contours and silhouettes not only of the figures, but also, above all, into the contours of the geometrically grid-like structures of new architecture.

These bundles of fabric and piles of clothes, stranded in Africa from the consumer society and throwaway culture of the First World (where on average each person goes through up to 18 kilos of clothes per year) operate in an invasive fashion, not only in Pauline Marcelle's group of paintings. According to statistics of the International Trade Center, African countries recently imported more than a billion US dollars' worth of used clothing per year.¹ Discarded textiles also count amongst such imports. These find their way to the so-called developing countries via old clothes collections; not, however, without having previously been turned into profit: "Dusty markets in Africa frequently represent the end-station for hundreds of tons of used clothing donated by individuals in Europe and America – mostly in the *bona fide* belief that they will be given freely to help people in need. In reality, however, the majority of this material ends up at commercially exploitative firms, who profit from this business in the developing countries."²

Nonetheless, for Pauline Marcelle it is not so much a question of the depiction of the praxis of the wealthy West doing business with the "impoverished South". Instead, she far rather addresses the cultural alterations, which ensue in the course of the process of globalization in the direction of "becoming Western" – and the accompanying diminishment of cultural diversity. Marcelle carries this out in a subtle manner, without superficial, perceptible accusation or lament, yet she achieves this even more persuasively by means of a pictorial language which initially conceals its content behind a multivalence of forms which are altogether aesthetically appealing, descriptive and attractive.

Precisely this aspect of encoding permits a comparison with certain other artists who dedicate themselves to this topic on the basis of having a first-hand “multicultural” biography as well. When, for example, the sculptor El Anatsui (who originates from Ghana, lives in Nigeria and works internationally) combines vast numbers of flattened metal tins and tops from Nigerian beer bottles into large-scale “textiles” which are reminiscent of voluminous curtains made of flamboyant African fabrics while at the same time their individual components evoke ideas about the influence of the global market, in particular that of the former colonial powers: “Alcohol was one of the commodities Europeans brought with them to exchange for goods in Africa”, says El Anatsui, and further points out that a connection between bottle tops and textile fabrics also exists in the fact that “they all have names that refer to incidents, people, historical and actual themes.”³ In turn, the British-Nigerian artist Yinka Shonibare, who designates himself a “post-colonial-hybrid”, is known, above all, for his figures clothed in seemingly Baroque costumes made out of apparently typical African fabrics. These textiles, related to Indonesian batiks, nevertheless originate in the Netherlands, where they are industrially produced for the African consumer market. “With his satirical and subversive stagings, Shonibare poses questions of cultural and ethnic relationships, of the legacy of the colonial past, of the transfer between cultural identities and power and the economy, which are concealed behind them.”⁴

Pauline Marcelle, for her part, also poses such questions. However she does not avail herself one-to-one of her materials, which are so heavy with meaning, let alone stage them in an opulent manner. The picture series mentioned here is based on digitally processed photographs, which Marcelle transfers to canvas and then reworks in oil paint. “[...] This layering of mechanical reproduction and painting, to the point where distinctions between hand and machine are difficult to recover” (as Andile Magengelele wrote about *Bend Down Boutique* in 2010) if anything, indirectly reflects the elusive transfer between sites of production and sites of outlet for the articles of clothing and textiles. And also between original and copy of brands and designs, between worthlessness and value, or between the search for, the acquisition of, and the loss of identity...

Every now and then, however, actual material does surface in Pauline Marcelle’s exhibitions. Beneath a thick coating of monochrome layers of paint in yellow, red or blue, a former piece of clothing is concealed, congealed into a sculptural object. Entitled *Blue Venus* or *The Big Beat*, hanging from the ceiling or lying on the floor, the objects definitively appear to be detached from the network of other textiles, which float around in the paintings and decorate entire rooms. Where *Blue Venus* or *The Big Beat* come from, out of what sort of material they were made, and what they once were, cannot be discerned. Nobody on the beach and certainly not at the “dusty market” of a bend down boutique would bend over for them. Yet, since Pauline Marcelle has transformed them into works of art, they have nevertheless arrived at a market where more will be offered to the observers than they could ever have dreamed.

Lucas Gehrmann

1 “Was Altkleider aus Deutschland für Afrika bedeuten”, SZ vom 29.05.2013/rebr
www.sueddeutsche.de/wirtschaft/textilrecycling-was-alkleider-aus-deutschland-fuer-afrika-bedeuten-1.1683519

2 “Heiß begehrt. Gependete Altkleider sind ein Millionengeschäft”, 3sat / nano, 07.01.2014,
www.3sat.de/page/?source=/nano/gesellschaft/174230/index.html

3 El Anatsui, *Ozone Layer and Yam Mounds*, *Nationalgalerie Berlin* 2010,
http://ww2.smb.museum/smb/wkt/wkt_artist.php?artist_id=3

4 *Yinka Shonibare, Double Dutch*, Kunsthalle Wien 2004, here cited after:
www.kunstmarkt.com/pages/mag/news_detail.html?id=63931

5 Andile Magengelele, “Pauline Marcelle: Bend Down Boutique – Joburg Works”,
www.paulinemarcelle.com/cms/front_content.php?idcat=5&lang=1&nav=works&work=text&text=