

I BELIEVE I CAN FLY

Nature and scenery play a central role in Eliška Bartek's oeuvre. Drawing on memories and emotions, she creates poeticised, all-enveloping abstractions. In other cases her images evolve from the immediate surroundings of nature, as in the „Hodler“ series. Some of her works take shape in her Berlin studio, for others the artist ventures into the mountains with her easel and painting utensils. On her quest to follow Hodler's footsteps, Bartek went on many trips to Switzerland throughout the past year, where she owns a chalet that serves as a retreat from everyday life. She has participated in several mountain hikes in the past, and regularly skis in the Alps. She wants to see, hear, feel and fly unfettered.

Her paintings and photographs always feature light and dark, colour and contrast. Her neo-impressionist images from 2008/9, blazing pixelated landscapes, bring matter to the boiling point, making it melt and stream out of the picture frames like colour magma, across all borderlines.

Eliška Bartek describes the silence of the world, a river, a tree, a bouquet of flowers as the sound of a surging orchestra. As if she were the golden eagle of the flames. Flying - finally, intoxicated by happiness and curiosity, ascending towards the sun that melts the wings of wax, the old wish to emulate the birds or the clouds. Riding on the highest level of energy, she grabs life with both hands, incessantly, via images that are deeds. Illusion and reality fuse into a sequence of atmospheric pictures, interrupted only by her photograms (2009), which are closer to painting than photography, and - with the Matterhorn as a motif- function as a contrasting and suggestive minimalist scenery in relation to the „Hodler“ series.

The „Hodler“ series began with colour sketches, a preparation and a cautious approach to Hodler's interpretations of landscape and the Swiss Alps. The final result however comes to us in the form of an austere black and white abstraction. The artist primes her canvases with white oil paint, only to cover them with black afterwards (or vice versa). Then she scrapes into the surface with the tools of a sculptor. It seems as if this raw and energetic treatment of materials obliterates the soft and at times almost sweetly romantic elements in Hodler's paintings - as well as annihilating the sirupy mountain mythology that city dwellers and foreigners like to nourish, expecting rosy-cheeked Heidi to be frolicking in every draft of mountain air. The artist's style is rhythmic and spontaneous, the composition almost resembling a collage.

Despite painting at original locations, Bartek assembles various groups of mountains in her images that do not have a geographic relation. Thus she fuses Niesen, Stockhornkette and Breithorn into a fictitious panorama, simply because it "fits so well". Eliška Bartek studied Hodler's depictions of the Thunersee (1904-1908) and the peaks of the Bern Alps (1908-1911) thoroughly. She took

great interest in the discourse of naturalism versus idealism, and the concept of the countryside's "inner values". Fascinated by Hodler's treatment of form and colour (colour as an expression of mood, form as true articulation of bare feeling) and his search for religiosity, Eliška Bartek felt the urge to go and visit the places where Hodler found his inspiration, and to delve into the views on „Thunersee mit Niesen“ (1910), „Niesen von Heustrich aus“ (1909), „Der Mönch“ (1911), „Das Breithorn“ (1911), „Jungfrau mit Silberhorn von Mürren aus“ (1911).

In her images, Bartek chooses freely to enlarge or to compress the mountains, altering proportions in favour of aesthetic criteria, and taking the liberty to include subjects in her compositions that are not present in the actual scenery. Although she absorbs the physical presence of her surroundings to the utmost, the impressions that she renders on canvas ultimately correspond more with an imaginative journey.

Bartek's pictures, small or middle format in size, burst with expressive energy, playful lightness and aggressive lines. Despite her admiration for the alpine landscape and her deep respect for Hodler's work, Eliška Bartek's paintings do not glorify the beauty of nature or idealise the work of a genius. Until today, the image of Switzerland and its harsh mountain landscape has been transfigured by the huge body of emphatic literature from the past, romanticising the pastoral landscape, as exemplified in the works of Jean-Jacques Rousseau or Friedrich Schiller's Wilhelm Tell. Yet the Alps have not been spared of contemporary problems caused by climate change and tourism.

By translating the Swiss mountainscape into a pastose relief of black and white, snow and earth, Eliška Bartek frees the Alps from the burden of cliché and dissociates herself from Hodler's perspective and from the exaggerations and incriminations brought against Switzerland, the country that she has called her home since 1976.

Christoph Tannert, Director Künstlerhaus Bethanien, Berlin