Elke Denda

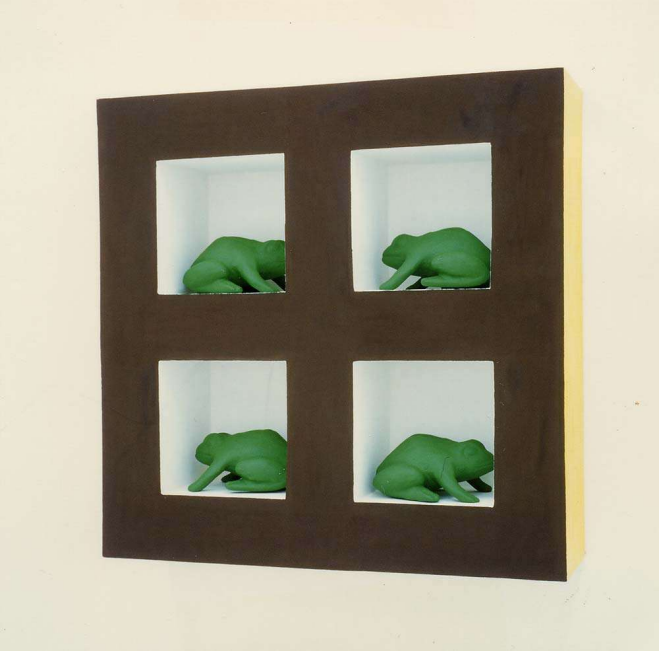
Galerie Schneider, April 7th - May 12th, 1989

Dreiecksockelbild (Triangle Base Picture), Acrylic on wood and plaster, 6 parts 330 x 220 cm 1989

When looking at Elke Denda's pictures, it's easy to fall into the delights and traps of ornament. Our compulsion to react to a confusing situation with suggestions for order finds a wide field of activity in these patterns. We want to find out what rules the formations are based on, because all of these pictures seem to have a blueprint. It's all too easy to be lured into a kind of visual and mental exercise." Julian Heynen rightly describes how the viewer experiences Elke Denda's works - and how he usually only notices it (too) late. This was most recently verified at the Schneider Gallery in Frankfurt, which presented six brand-new pictures by the newly crowned Schmidt-Rottluff scholarship holder.

The artist, born in 1956, only makes serial art for the first moment. Her pictures, painted with changing but clear color materials on wood, glass, cardboard and nettle, turn vision upside down. It's simply tricky what the artist meticulously paints, and she even resorted to screen printing for the "rabbit picture", although she created a unique piece. She placed small blue rabbits in four different positions on white-painted wood, so that not only mirror images but also the most daring, intricate ornaments emerged in the gaps. From a distance you could almost believe it was a large ceramic work.

But, says Julian Heynen's next objection, what is the point of the search game based on the pattern? Isn't it more of a protection against "the frank emotional appeal of these pictures?" Because Elke Denda's works are designed to be light and playful, almost playful; But perhaps that's precisely why you're looking for a system behind it, especially when you know that Denda studied nothing other than mathematics before she turned to art. Constructed according to mathematical principles? This question arose after I and the gallery owner tried in vain to create a system for the six-part “triangular base picture”. We had found approaches to this, but it wasn't enough for a consistent scheme.



Froschbild (Frog picture), Acrylic on wood and plaster, 98 x 98 x 28 cm 1989
Photos: Mara Eggert. Courtesy Galerie Schneider, Frankfurt

Of course Denda also constructs, but doesn't she rather work with a scale of feelings and moods, which ultimately only has to be mathematically correct? Animals, symbols and geometric shapes such as circles, squares and diamonds appear again and again, but each time something is different - even if it is just a tiny movement. Because none of the frog, bear, penguin, salamander, bird and Ilex motifs created in recent years were made using the template. The world of forms in strong colors breaks through the law of the series and suspends it - which is an unsettling matter for the viewer, because he will automatically look for something different.

The eye must be sharpened for such subtleties, otherwise the retina will only flicker. But delving into the details doesn't help much; at some point you have to focus on the big picture again - or look away. Then the best thing to do is to take a long look at the “frog picture”, a square brown painted wooden box with four white shop windows, each with a plaster frog sitting in it. From a distance, the box radiates a golden glow - the yellow painting on the side still shines through from a distance. If you take one of the frogs out of the box, the white opening seems to take on infinite depth and brightness - and it's not even 30 centimeters.

Elke Denda's private symbolism cannot be fully deciphered without her help. But what is extraordinary for modern art is her confident handling of ornament, which has often been supposedly brought to life since the public burial. In my opinion, only Elke Denda has managed to do this so far, and with one consequence: you don't even think about kitsch or decor. Denda, who studied with Fritz Schwegler in Düsseldorf from 1981 to 1987, varies these - perhaps auspicious - shapes, symbols and ornaments until the feeling of finiteness disappears.

Christian Huther