

When the French painter Nicolas Poussin first immortalized the inscription “Et in Arcadia Ego” in one of his pastoral paintings around 1627, the Latin sentence on the stone epitaph sparked a jumble of different interpretations. “I too (am) in Arcadia” – merely a rough translation of the grammatical untranslatability – poses the question of who exactly is speaking here. We can at least partially determine where the unknown voice comes from, as it refers to the ancient myth of Arcadia: this idyllic place, where people dwell as contented and happy shepherds beyond physical labor and social pressure to conform, inspired the European Renaissance, as so many other topoi of antiquity, in countless texts and artistic reflections. Arcadia is an idealized vision of untouched nature, a poetic space that simultaneously refers to its beauty and transience. A place between life and death, between light and darkness. A place of dissolution of boundaries and simulation, which Manuel Stehli and Stefan Knauf also engage with.

At first glance, the two Berlin-based artists work very differently. In his paintings, Manuel Stehli depicts figure and flora with both translucent fragility and impasto impenetrability: distant and yet omnipresent in their contact with each other (or with the picture plane). Stefan Knauf focusses on installative works that follow his interests as they relate to nature architecture, and the traces of correlated ideological and colonial gaps. Aside from their long-standing friendship Stehli and Knauf are united by a constant exploration of abstraction and reality. The schematically reduced imitation of recognizable forms and content brings the resting, faceless bodies on the large-format canvases into an almost self-evident dialogue with the silver cacti and reduced landscape reliefs made of inflated and galvanized sheet steel. The works of both artists seem to dissolve traditional dichotomies such as artificiality and nature. They blur the given polarities with which we normally categorize and view the world around us.

Manuel Stehli and Stefan Knauf also challenge our perception in the exhibition space itself. Beyond the visual, the gray carpeting influences our physical movements in the room. Our steps are sometimes more tentative, more deliberate, more subdued. Like a clear moonlit night, a shadow lies over our experiences in the room. A shadow that blurs the given structures and hierarchies of the reality experienced during the day. The night as a place of dissolution of boundaries and simulation perhaps also reflects what Donna Haraway describes as a hybrid existence in her “Cyborg Manifesto” (1985): A place where traditional dichotomies dissolve, where “the boundaries between man and machine, nature and culture, organism and machine are dissolved.” At this very interface, Stehli and Knauf create a contemporary Arcadia, a complex landscape of parallel ambivalences and opposites. From here, an unknown voice speaks to us once again – in this case as a disembodied metaphor for the hybridity of the night, which in its shadowy darkness harbors illusions as well as authentic experiences and new insights.

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