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above:
andy denzler
east london #9, 2008
oil on canvas
190 x 250 cm
courtesy fabian &
claude walter galerie, zurich

left:
andy denzler
amores perros I, 2008
oil on canvas
80 x 70 cm
courtesy fabian &
claude walter galerie, zurich

ANDY DENZLER BY ULRIKE FUCHS / TRANSLATED BY JAN SINSTADT

PEOPLE IN MOTION

The paintings of Andy Denzler read like a 1960s television interference; the picture would momentarily grow shaky and flicker from side to side just the moment before the test pattern took over your visual world.

Fast forward to *Urban Figures*, a series of paintings made by Denzler in 2007, whose subjects seem caught in delirium tremens of similar shaking distortion.

Here one discerns variously grouped figures in differing constellations, set against changing backgrounds and moving about within an indistinct pictorial space. Their backs may be turned to the viewer in one painting, while in another they are seen striding diagonally into or out of the frame. Occasionally they hang around in small groups. At other times, they walk parallel but separate tracks, none taking notice of the others, or indeed exhibiting any sign of mutual recognition.

They tote carrier bags, rucksacks, satchels or attaché cases; leisure-time clothing. They appear to have been pulled from a real and decidedly urban world.

Yet something has set this world off; its planes seem shifted and superimposed – as if earthquakes that scored down suburban California streets, setting the curbs, sidewalks and our visual order askew.

In Denzler's work there are various dynamic elements overlapping, reminiscent of a giant flipbook being rifled too fast: future and past at once overlay the present.

Quivering contours grow blurred, diminish. Like the forms they delineate, which appear overcast by broad strokes of color. Their edges meld with the background or substrata, further confounding attempts at spatial or physical perception.

The people in these paintings divulge little about themselves; virtually all is left to the viewer's imagination. Andy Denzler's paintings are not narrative art. While the figures they depict may appear close to life size, they seem interposed by invisible walls or glassy filters.

The development of Andy Denzler's compositional style gains an additional dimension in his portraiture. This processual, not exclusively visual aspect of perception comes forward as a central theme. Here, the artist has established a fruitful relationship between his earlier abstract color-field painting and the human form.

A visit to his new studio in Zurich presented the opportunity to question Andy about his work. Here he talked frankly about the developmental path that led from his early, non-representational paintings to these most recent works.

Ulrike Fuchs: After graduating from the Zurich School of Applied Arts, you went on to attend various other art schools for additional studies in painting and photography. How do these techniques connect with your own work?

Andy Denzler: Photography is a very important element of my activity. As a former military photographer I underwent training in shooting technique, darkroom work, composition and development. Portraiture was very much a part of the job, along with panoramic shoots up in the mountains. Those would involve lining-up six or more images side by side, for terrain reconnaissance purposes. I would then print these specialized composites myself, by hand. Of course, that kind of experience has been an ongoing contributor to my later, artistic work.

These days I work either with found photographs or ones I have taken myself. The "Motion Figures", too, were photographed in public spaces – a beach, say – and subsequently rendered on canvas.

UF: Are those photos snapshots, or were they posed?

AD: No, no, they were just random shots.

UF: The surroundings grow indistinct, so only the arrangement of the figures makes it through into the painting – or do you change that, too?

AD: A great deal gets changed and shifted around as part of the painting process. The snapshot only serves as a starting point. I whittle down the background, which is where my earlier, abstract work enters the picture. Before moving into figurative painting, I produced abstract art for a number of years. Those were multipart color-field paintings, with each field given a different treatment. Along the way, I developed my own visual language and color palette. I was interested in differences of surface texture within the actual painting: hard, fine, abrasive, broken, sharp, diffuse, bumpy, smooth. Those opposites are responsible for producing the dynamic within a given area of color. Painting like this is about engaging the paint itself.

UF: How did you proceed from geographic photographs to totally non-objective paintings?

AD: I have always been interested in abstract painting; monochrome expanses and the vastness they achieve. The American abstract expressionists fascinated me a great deal in the early 90s. I established a symbiotic link between them and the Zurich tradition of concrete art, which led to geometrical apportionment of the colored areas. Yet within each one, I still applied the paint in a very gestural way, briskly and not flat on the canvas. These areas were quite colorful to begin with, and then increasingly shifted towards earth tones. Earthy orange-red became a characteristic color of mine during that period.

UF: Does that color hold any mental association, or a particular significance for you?

AD: Yes, I did have rather an important experience. I associate that shade with the color of soil, specifically that of South Africa. At the age of 19 I lived there for one year and felt greatly influenced by that country, which was still in the apartheid era. My abstract paintings were attempts to capture South Africa's vastness, its expansive horizons and endlessness. Coming from a small country like Switzerland, all that space was a totally new experience for me.

UF: So when did the objective dimension return to your work?

AD: Around the year 2000, something began happening in my abstract work that caught my fascination. It seemed almost representational.

UF: Did it stem from objective subject matter?

AD: No, I "sampled" drafts of my own abstract paintings, in other words I recomposed them, picked out individual details and applied new colors. That is how this element of motion came about, which I then carried forward into the painting. I also embarked on a portrait using this technique. It took a good while to learn how to build up the paint layers in a way that produced the right conditions of light and shade for an objective image. This portrait indeed made use of the same motion-blur technique I employ today.

UF: Is this image manipulation computer-based or on canvas?

AD: It all starts with one or more photographs that are further edited on the computer screen. When I start painting, I already have a clear concept of how the finished work will look. I shift the figures around on the computer, modify the colors of their clothing and other objects, as well as the background. The result is a working draft, which I then print out.

UF: Do you also test the blur and displacements using a photo editor?

AD: My work is based on very clear images. Motion blur only enters the picture during the painting process. It is a kind of distortion, or filter, which I first apply while painting. That is where the real thrill lies: every time it is both a surprise and a small miracle as I observe what happens and find out whether or not the picture works. Standing before the canvas and applying paint is always a challenge. It is a fast process, which calls for fast decisions. The

further the painting develops, the more exciting it gets.

UF: To backtrack once more: having reached the stage of a working draft, you call a halt and sit back for a while. What happens after that, as you work at the canvas?

AD: I always paint at high speed. I may use acrylic paint for a less-involved painting, say a portrait or one that contains only one or two figures. But compositions with several figures are tougher to handle with acrylic and so I use oils, which are not so fast-drying.

UF: It would be false to assert that your work uses color-field painting merely as a stage of sorts, onto which you paste the figures. Rather, the figures are integrated with the color fields and the background. How do you accomplish that?

AD: Getting it right has taken years of work. The motion blur is not really blurring in the true sense; the effect does not extend to the entire figure. More precisely, only certain parts of the painting become fragmentarily shifted and skewed. It is that which imparts the figures' sense of movement. Occasionally, their edges or bodies also morph. As a result, structures arise, that reach out into the surrounding space. That is the source of the dynamic.

UF: Does your monochrome work also contain as many layers of paint?

AD: Yes, indeed. I use the density of material to give a painting its tactile quality. Approach it close enough, and you will again see just abstract areas. By the way, such a thick coat of oil paint may take up to a year to dry completely. That, unfortunately, is an inherent problem with this painting technique.

UF: *Figures and Landscapes* is your most recent series. Works like *Last Paradise* and *Under Water World* evidence a different technique; can you say something about it?

AD: The figures in these paintings are in fact those which underlie the *Motion Paintings* series. What grows apparent here is the flow of my brushwork, from which I build up the figures and the color. This is how things actually look like beneath the surface of the *Motion Paintings*.

I do not use distortion in the *Figures and Landscapes*. They also took shape without the help of a working draft. The apocalyptic landscapes in which the figures are standing developed during the painting process. The outcome is somewhat unfamiliar – experimentally surreal, if you will. This process of discovery on canvas was exactly what excited me about this work. Embarking on a painting like this is an adventure every time. I never know exactly how it will look by the end. The figures present at the outset might also change in the course of the painting process. Working like this is the opposite of a planned approach based on a working draft.

UF: Could you walk us through this process using the example of your 2008 painting, *Last Paradise*? The mermaid figure was there at the start.

AD: It could also be that the feminine figure took on a different form



andy denzler, last paradise, 2007, oil on canvas, 140 x 120 cm, courtesy fabian & claude walter galerie, zurich

as the painting developed. First came the figure, then the largely inverted landscape surrounding it. Whether or not to add clouds, what color to take, all that stuff I decide on the fly. What interests me in particular are not just the color mistakes, but also the painting mistakes – a slapdash, rough-edged approach that somehow intrigues me, an "I don't care, I just paint" attitude. Meanwhile, the figures develop within the painting as their story takes shape.

UF: What do you mean by "painting mistakes"?

AD: They can be "happy accidents", a slip-up that I actually think looks rather good and consciously use as a design element, or else transform into one.

UF: Do you have an interest in viewers' being able to grasp the story you, as the painter, tell with your works, or should they invent their own stories?

AD: My personal experiences of course flow into the works, but viewers should not hesitate to come up with stories of their own invention. Abstract elements of my paintings, my overall graphic vocabulary, things I have witnessed – all of these play a role in my figurative art.

It looks like an exciting path ahead. Thank you for sharing your thoughts with us. ■

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