

Women Are Looking ...

Welcome to the exhibition *Women Are Looking ...* and thank you very much for the chance to add a few introductory words. In my opening speech I want to sharpen our view on fine arts by presenting the artist Christine Nehammer-Markus and her work and by talking a bit about the title of the exhibition, how *Women Are Looking ...*

Christine Nehammer-Markus studied at the *Grafischen Lehr- und Versuchsanstalt*, she lives and works in Vienna and Seebenstein in Lower Austria. However, we can best meet her when facing her paintings: heads are the main actors in this exhibition and an ever-returning motive in her work. Most of them are definitely female heads, though even in the most minimalistic ones I can still see women; nevertheless in many of them I personally can detect the artist herself. She however is reticent about it. Maybe you already noticed while walking through the exhibition that none of her paintings has an explanatory title. There are no meaningful titles, but Christine Nehammer-Markus rather confronts us directly with her paintings, thus, we have to explain them ourselves by engaging intensively. We have to open ourselves looking at the paintings, which I generally perceive as quite feminine.

In the last years the female aspect/view in art was increasingly presented in museums and galleries: In 2008 and 2015 Schirn had an exhibition about female painters, in 2017 there was an exhibition called *Frauen die auf Männer schauen* in St. Pölten and currently we have two exhibitions in Vienna (Stadt der Frauen in the Belvedere and *Flying High* in Kunstforum). Just recently Siri Hustved's book *A Woman Looking at Men Looking at Women* came out, in which she published her articles and speeches about this subject. Right now the way women are looking and the art they are producing are a focal point in the perception of art. Personally I find this quite late, because – to put it a bit provocatively – women are looking differently!! This could have been of general interest at an earlier time than now.

Even in the sciences, the gender difference in seeing was rather late of any interest at all; only in 2012 related tests were conducted which revealed that the women's perception is slightly shifted into the direction of the shorter wavelengths, thus women behold the world in warmer hues, whereas men perceive the same optical stimuli in cooler colors. It still is not quite clear what causes these differences; however, some scientists assume that testosterone might be responsible because the primary visual cortex has probably the highest density of receptor sites for the male sex hormone in the entire brain. Testosterone might also offer an explanation for one more difference which happens already at first eye contact: When looking at faces of people or animals men look first and nearly exclusively in the eyes, while women direct their view rather lower on the nose and the mouth; in due course though women look longer than men on the body of a person.

Quite late the dispute about the female view arrived in the arts or rather arrived again, as painting has been *ab ovo* a female art! This is what we learn from Pliny the Elder. He was one of the major scientists of his time. In his magnum opus *Naturalis historia* of 37 volumes he dedicated the last five volumes to painting and history of art. He would have probably written more about this subject would he not have died in the eruption of Mount Vesuvius in 79 AD.

Pliny the Elder recounts the origin of painting in relation with a very emotional

love story: Debutade, a girl from Corinth bid farewell to her lover who was about to move faraway – probably going to war. The lamp cast a shadow on the wall and the girl drew his shape with a line in order to capture the image of her paramour. A woman and an emotional moment, when she is looking at her lover in the warm light of a candle marks the birth of paintings, quasi the big bang of visual arts, when the female view – in connection with emotion and empathy – becomes the basis of art. The arts build on this, thus differentiating from reality. Almost as a side effect Debutade inspired her father to invent sculptures, thus, becoming the first muse in the history of art.

In addition Pliny the Elder recounts in detail the history of Apelles of Kos, the most renowned painter of antique times. What distinguished his paintings from all the others was – as he never tired to cite – that his paintings were full of *charis*. Charis is the Greek goddess of charm (natural beauty). When asked about the process of creativity, many painters answered that this is the moment when they discover their female side and women often accompanied them in the process as their muses. Even today we still commemorate this goddess when we talk of a charismatic person. Let us get back to Apelles: He was Alexander the Great's favorite painter and his court painter. Alexander was the greatest field commander of his time. When two persons with so much charisma meet we can expect a big feat and in this case we were not disappointed. Alexander the Great appointed Apelles to paint his favorite concubine/hetaera Pankaspe. Her exceptional physical beauty could only be met by a nude painting, in the process of which Apelles fell promptly in love with his model. Alexander the Great though was so enraptured by the depiction of her full of *charis*, that he bestowed the girl to the painter and kept the painting.

Why I am telling you these stories? Because they contain a message: Starting with the female view, the first painting and the emotions contained therein the painting values in the end more than what it depicts, since art rises above life.

This exhibition presents the paintings of Christine Nehammer-Markus, hence a glimpse into her world showing us the way she looks at it. We look at her women and they look back at us.

With this in mind, I ask you to have a look at the exhibition of Christine Nehammer-Markus.

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