



What Is this Thing Called Art?



Julian Charrière:
Where Waters Meet –
3.18 atmospheres (detail),
Pigment Print on
Hahnemühle Photo
Rag Ultra Smooth
on Alu-Dibond, 2019

Art is a niche. It often exists because so-called reality is felt to be unbearable. Because, and especially when, misery and cruelty once again prevail in the real world. The powerful, even traumatic effects of cruelty come less from natural disasters, powerful winds, thunderstorms, floods or fire. Nor from our grief over the associated losses. What seems harder to bear and often more lasting are the massive cruelties human beings inflict on one another. “Misery”, as the always impetuous art mediator Franz Dahlem recently put it in an interview book, “Misery does not come into being the way potatoes do. It is not sown, does not germinate and grow. Misery is part of human intelligence. And that’s us. We participate in misery.” Dahlem also said that the fundamental task of art may well be to find “uncharted territory”. But that alone is not its definitive trait. **It is, rather, a matter of evoking and manifesting significant, almost tempestuous experiences through art out of the given present.** What is meant by this, not only according to Dahlem, is not our fantasies or even fantasms, and certainly not, unfortunately, the entertainment and edification that we understandably want from art for relief from the stresses of life. No, the gift of art is something initially unthinkable, hitherto unimagined, which then, very suddenly, becomes so obvious that it bowls us over, almost like a powerful natural event. It is the shock of experiencing something very important through the encounter with art. It could be Joseph Beuys’ felt suit, a multiple in an edition of 100 that I laughed at for too long, until I was able to understand it. Or the naked children in Michaël Borremans’ paintings, whose arms have been chopped off, standing with a somewhat carefree air on a beautiful, light beige sand floor with no trace of the perpetrators or of the deed itself to be seen. **Art that is shocking in this sense is about something completely different than just the idea that something bad has happened. Although terrible things do happen every day as a result of wars and violent conflict.** Artists have a sensorium similar to that of alert animals in whom the mere smell of danger triggers an urgent alarm. Such a scent, a strong intuition, is evoked by the work of art as well. An experience, first in a moment’s flash and then in subsequent reflection, that something has been very wrong that I ignored because I never wanted to recognize it as a danger. It is such experience that is manifested in great art. This is not meant as a reproach. None of us can be everywhere, we cannot all and at all times experience enlightenment as in a house of worship. But art — often without any religion — evokes a kind of divine afflatus by letting us feel something that is clearly greater than we are.

Why does this work? We humans live in a world where we may be able to love more than animals do, but we also seem capable of much more hate. We are part of nature, but we don't just bloom and then wither like a flower, no, we are more egocentric and often want to excel, say, the red rose in beauty and splendor, whether by means of lipstick or fast cars. And when we are unable or not allowed to do that, we can lose all our bearings, thinking that we are by rights the first and central rose among roses, a unique and highly poisonous pitch-black variety. A snake, although snakes aren't really that bad. This sounds romantic and too simple an explanation. We are far from having an adequate theory of emotions. **But the role of art, indeed of the arts, is remarkably often a conscious groping and teetering in no man's land, in forlornness and confusion, halfway between falling into the abyss and heaven-storming inspiration. So-called normal people can scarcely understand how important this is and what the stakes of the struggle are.** So their imagination requires some helpful nudging. When war breaks out, when real and catastrophic hardship arises, it is artists in particular, along with the institutions that support them, that are often the first to help. Who vacate their place, who temporarily find themselves almost superfluous. Because they see how urgent it is for real affliction to be put in the foreground. As much as art is a niche, it emerges from the niche in such situations like hardly any other human force. It then opposes the cruelty that human beings inflict on each other. Which in autocratic societies can lead to arrests, torture and death. **If this kind of contemplative and passionately passive and then again very active art did not exist, if only love and peace prevailed among human beings, alongside the famous battle of the sexes, the well-known struggle for the most beautiful and intelligent woman, the most handsome or most powerful man, and the struggle for food and treasure — then we would have a different kind of art.** We would have trophies, we would have memorials and beautiful accounts of important events. But we would not have the kind of art that “knocks us off our socks,” so to speak. But that is the kind of art that shows us how far we have yet to go before we evolve to become fully human — especially now, in view of a global population of eight billion people, an estimated eighty million refugees, an ongoing pandemic, and a climate crisis that is just beginning to impinge on our consciousness. We will probably not arrive at our goal without great art. Bergos Art Consult wishes everyone a happy Easter.

DR. THOMAS KELLEIN
Head of Art Consult
thomas.kellein@bergos.ch

This publication is for information and marketing purposes only. The provided information is not legally binding and neither constitutes a financial analysis, nor a sales prospectus, an offer for investment-transactions, an asset management mandate or an investment idea and does not substitute any legal, tax or financial advice.