

*“The natural history museum in Salzburg, the Haus der Natur, is for him the ideal place to find what he is looking for.”
(Werner Thuswaldner)*

Erich Gruber – Impressions through Images

A frequent theme in literature are the impressions someone is exposed to who grows up in the country. They also prove to be extraordinarily rich for the visual arts, as exemplified by Erich Gruber. The circumstances of his socialisation were not extreme and cannot be compared with the experiences that the writer Franz Innerhofer went through. While still a child Gruber had a refined sensitivity for the forms of life in the country, which often seem strange, and especially for the role religion claims for itself and the images it uses. He is still preoccupied with the great promise that religious education gives to children, a promise that can never be kept. First communion, wedding, death: these are distinctive stations in life that are all adorned by religious rituals. Piety often gains its inspiration from devotional pictures. They present themselves mostly as undisguised kitsch and precisely for that reason are a treasure trove for Erich Gruber.

Erich Gruber was born in the small town of Schwarzach in the province of Salzburg, Austria and originally intended to take up a totally different career. He completed his schooling at the Higher Technical College in Saalfelden but realised that he had an ever more urgent need to convey an artistic message. It could also be said that artistic means help him to come to terms with existential problems which are on his mind. He attended the Mozarteum Academy from 1995. He soon reached such a high standard in painting skills that he was able to realise his artistic ideas.

In a first phase the results were meticulously realistic depictions of pieces of meat. Erich Gruber became a meat painter. Raw meat makes the observer think about the origins of the meat that came from an animal which had previously been alive before being subjected to a rigorous procedure. This was how Erich Gruber made people think about things. This is indeed his intention, even though he does not want to be regarded as a “missionary” artist in the narrower sense.

Erich Gruber was soon no longer satisfied with being merely an accomplished painter of pieces of meat. His mystical phase began and he turned his attention to special forms of piety as can still be found nowadays in the country. This is true not only of Austria, but is an international phenomenon. For instance, Erich Gruber discovered that Polish Catholicism produces even more obscure manifestations of religiousness. The imagination runs riot, and bigotry, a primitive form of piety, produces all kinds of strange effects. The most popular magically transcended objects are the small baby Jesus and Mary the “mother of God”. The innocent baby Jesus and the “lovely woman” are obviously the motifs most easily grasped by religious fervour.

This is the starting-point for Erich Gruber. The figure of Mary has an excellent place in the peasant living

room; she is adorned with crocheted lace like a bride and set in a decorative ambience. One of Gruber's series is called *The Happiness of the Children going to Communion*. These are photographs of little girls on the day of their first communion; the photos are carefully worked over with acrylic, ink and coloured pencils. They too are made to look like little brides. Their faces show hardly any expression and they look disturbed and serious. The day does not seem to be a happy occasion for them but instead is something rather more threatening and grave, and from now on they have a burden to bear.

Gruber focuses therefore on the intensive impressions that children and young people experience through religious forms that are conveyed to them with hardly any verbal explanation. They are impressions that are engraved into their sub-consciousness for a lifetime. They are stored there so that a life-long link is created, and a life-long incarceration in rigid ideas about religion is ensured. This presentation of religious subjects makes use of a certain kind of imagery that creates its own "ideal of beauty". At the same time it serves to influence, or even discipline young people in a critical phase of their life. Incidentally, highly dubious models of visual art are established for children at a very early stage: art has to be beautiful and touching.

Gruber welcomes the entire repertoire of religious kitsch as material which he can use at will. He does indeed recognise how ridiculous the pictorial expression of all this "propaganda material" is, yet at the same time he feels attracted by triviality and a simple sweet depiction. This is because he knows not least what a strong impact can be made on the emotions of a child. Over the years, with his special look, he has come across many treasures of this kind and he has become a collector of these oddities. Gruber adopts a particular approach to his work on these themes. He does not see himself in the role of an enlightener who would like to show his public how they were bluffed when they saw things with the eyes of a child. Nevertheless, he creates space for the observer to engage in reflection. Gruber apparently takes the religious kitsch of the illustrated prayer books and tracts seriously, appropriates the motifs and further develops them according to his own wishes. He alienates them in a particular way but it is not a matter of exposing them. In his most recent paintings the object becomes increasingly blurred. Layer upon layer is applied in several working processes; the observer has increasing freedom of interpretation. At the same time the illustrative function is no longer of prime importance, the work can be perceived as painting in its own right.

Erich Gruber also devotes himself consistently to drawing, so as not to lose touch with the ground. The natural history museum in Salzburg, the *Haus der Natur*, is for him the ideal place to find what he is looking for. He consciously does not go out into the "free nature" but goes where nature is presented, as it were, second hand. The prepared animals, seemingly frozen in movement, interest him, in other words the manner in which nature is staged here. It is also true of Erich Gruber's drawings that he does not set to work in carefree abandon, but instead entangles the observer in thinking about deception and genuineness, and about manipulation.