Thoughts on Chris Drange's Art

By Raimar Stange

Chris Drange, who studied painting under Anselm Reyle at the Hochschule für bildende Künste in Hamburg, is known for his sensitive, conceptual portrait painting that is representative of so-called post-digital pop art. In his work Drange combines the venerable medium of painting with social media images in a productive dialogue, while attempting to visualize the identity-endowing options of Internet networks. Drange's portraits do not entirely adhere to the tradition of pop art. They also have roots in Renaissance court paintings, because, for example, the subjects he presents are also glamourous exemplars, the "celebrities" of our digital world. Thus, social media stars such as Kylie Jenner, Emrata, or Loren Gray can be found in a photo(shop) realistic style on his large-format canvases.

Drange initially delegates the task of painting to the computer's artificial intelligence, then to the anonymity of Asian painting factories. But, first things first: Drange's work begins with intensive research into relevant networks, such as Instagram, Snapchat or Pinterest. Filtering his subjects from these sources the artist then processes the seductively beautiful portraits—or, to put it more precisely, the self-portraits, because the pictures are all selfies—on the computer. He selects emojis to add to the pictures, collaging the materials. Then this version of the selfie is enlarged to its predetermined final dimensions at a machine learning factory in Lithuania. The data is emailed to China, where an oil painting manufacture finally paints the portrait on canvas. Drange's predecessors in this type of almost conceptual painting strategy are well known: Martin Kippenberger did not execute the paintings in his 1981 series *Lieber Maler, bitte mal mir* (Dear painter, please paint me). Rather, he left the task to a professional cinema poster painter. Jonathan Monk then gave this process another twist by having these paintings painted by the employees of a painting factory in Asia in 2008.

Unlike Kippenberger and Monk, however, Drange is concerned with more than the issues of authorship and the artist's signature. First of all, computer technology helps him to give digital

images (the above-mentioned emojis betray the origins of the pictures) a new material reality. The data painted on canvas are wrested from the intangible river of data and are now artistically elevated, practically readymades. As such, the painted selfies become nearly kitschy allegories of beauty and youth, as well as of temporality and death. As previously said: this art certainly stands in the tradition of certain aspects of "classic" portrait painting.

It is precisely this moment of supposed kitsch that is of significance here, for, after all, kitsch is partly characterized by a moment of "fulfillment" and "freedom" that is also inherent in "false needs," as Theodor W. Adorno moralizingly called them in his essay "Functionalism Today, written in 1966. It is this moment of happiness, which also deliberately allows people who are not "art experts" to have access to Drange's painting, that makes it possible for these paintings to say something about the emotional content of the social media world. In the process, as the artist himself says, "he abandons the strategy of critique" without, however, becoming superficial or even affirmative. Rather, it is "being in agreement" (which, after all, can also be called "not being in agreement," as Bertholt Brecht says in *Materialien zu 'Baal,' 1918–1926*) that is the key here to a possible kind of reception that both perceives and understands—a strategy that is, not coincidentally, similar to pop art's and its use of "over-affirmation."

Back to the selfie genre: this form of self-portrait is essentially initiated through self-identification, which results in the presentation of the self in media, and can thus motivate others to identify, too. This effect, which also opens up the potential for Drange's paintings to become "art for all," as Hilmar Hoffmann calls it, is also up for discussion in his book *Relics* (2017). Accompanying the selfies of globally successful Instagrammers such as Kim Kardashian or Selena Gomez in the book, which is about as big as a smartphone, are the comments and selfies of their "followers." It quickly becomes clear that the identification that occurs there is not "blind loyalty." Instead, it is something that sometimes not only results in ironic attitudes, but also always in the followers' "own" presentation of themselves, and it is precisely this process of endowing identity that can be read in the followers' selfies.

CHRISDRANGE.COM