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Hope is a dangerous thing

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Longing, idealization and failure are central themes negotiated in the work of Elisa Barrera (*1989 in Turin, working in Hamburg). A figure that combines these motifs for Barrera is that of the “Young Girl”: “The Young-Girl never creates anything. All in all she only creates herself.”¹ As the French author collective Tiqqun wrote in the late 1990s in their text “Pre-Liminary Materials for a Theory of the young-girl”, the “young-girl” was conceived of as a conceptual “vision-machine.”² There it is described as a construct borne out of the consumerism of western societies, similar to the notion of the “teenager” – a fictional ideal, pressed into the image of a young girl. The “young-girl” is eternally beautiful and will never out-grow her status as teenager and It-girl. Yet she is a copy with no original, a simulacrum, a trace that seems to disappear constantly as it leads nowhere.³ Barrera however isn’t interested in becoming the “young-girl” herself. She does not recreate pictures that have never existed in the first place, like Cindy Sherman, nor does she position her work within the context of the internet like Amalia Ulman, or the artistic network like Reena Spaulings. Barrera does not imitate the It-girl, but instead loves, observes and follows every step she does. Her works therefore take the programmatic position of an outsider, an adoring teenager, drawing pictures of idols into their notebook.

Besides detailed drawings of flowers, figures such as Lana del Rey, stylized and commercial depictions of women, self-portraits and portraits of friends reoccur as motifs. Fan-art, idealizing pop stars, models, friends and relationships. The hues used in her drawings usually alternate between grey, silver or purple, reflecting the atmosphere and distant memories of the cold glow of a screen. Purple or violet also evoke connotations of unrequited lust, of religious mysticism, of loneliness and inner unrest. They are also the colors of the women’s movement.

Barrera’s spatial installations consist of gingerly used materials such as rhinestones, glitter, dust or metal. Sometimes almost bordering on shyness, the careful handling of the material and use of fragmented form language is reinforced by Barrera by the fact that her works demand the constant restraint of expressive-artistic gestures. One can even feel a refusal of letting her works become reified and finished objects.

An untitled work of Barrera consists of small, silver metal butterflies, inconspicuously attached to various lamps and window handles in the exhibition space. Although inconspicuous and in some ways “girly”, they also exude an icy and unmoving bareness. The butterflies, as much as the “young-girl”, come from a decision for a particular symbolism – death, psyche, misery, redemption.

Such states of hopeless sentimentality and earnest emotional vulnerability are further emphasized by the butterflies’ unfinished and imperfect production. The small scratches and rough edges therefore point to the open-endedness of the process of their making, as if still waiting for the final polish still to occur, that would also enable them to circulate as a commodity. Such immanent inadequacy and “un-finishedness” shimmering through Barrera’s drawings and installations, carries within it the failure of a subject, by way of its implied unprofessionalism. It is however a subject who, in the face of a society demanding idealization, constantly feels “not good enough”. While these shy drawings on the one hand relate to their motives by way of idealizing them, they also challenge, through a perspective grounded in the critique of the capitalist “young-girl”. A teenager, through their imperfection and rough edges, becomes, in an adoring relationship to an idol, the vessel for a conflict between fiction and reality. The volatility of this relationship – diffuse and difficult to get a hold of, as it is fraught with opaque feelings, power-relations, desires and dramatizations – forms a central part of Barrera’s works, as they also point to the weakness of the subject and the artistic struggle in the face of a world build on speculative and fictitious pressures and demands.

1 TIQQUN, Preliminary Materials for a Theory of the Young-Girl, Semiotext(e), New York 1999, p. 24.

2 The term “teenager” has never found a direct translation in German. When the term became more popular in the 1950’s, its connotation was strongly gendered, describing mostly young women. Similar to the then popular term “Backfisch” (literally meaning “fried fish”) it was associated with girls deemed too immature, i.e. not ready for the world of men.

3 Jaques Derrida, Die differance, in: Peter Engelmann (Ed.), Postmoderne und Dekonstruktion, Reclam, Stuttgart 1990, p. 107.