

ILL – BEGOTTEN TREASURES

Wolf-whistling at fallen angels in Lukas Duwenhögger's imagined worlds

Article by Charlie Fox
Frieze, Issue 169
March 2015

Some boys don't belong in school, they're just too strange. Lukas Duwenhögger's paintings, collages and drawings are wild proof that he was one of those prodigious oddities that commence their careers by producing a riotous carnival of full-grown work while still in adolescence. More than three decades later, Duwenhögger remains an *echt* malcontent, resisting the confines of any temporarily illuminating scene or catchy theoretical rubric.

The nature of this German artist's misbehaviour might be difficult to discern at first: he isn't messily confessional or prone to indulging in high-spirited defacements of old masters, that favourite pastime of teen rascals and ageing rakes alike. Gazing at his drawings, I'm certain I haven't seen anything so gentle since I first pawed through a copy of Andy Warhol's picture book *25 Cats Name Sam and One Blue Pussy* (1954). Everything in Duwenhögger's work aches with desire but he also has uncommon fun with homoerotic longing, wolf-whistling at its more fabulous practitioners, hidden traditions and masquerades. He belongs alongside the many great queer sensualists who his work wittily invokes: patriarchal goons beware! In his youth, Duwenhögger was wholly opposed to the state of German art, which moved between Wagnerian bombast and conceptual austerity in its attempts to express postwar angst, and so hit upon the far more luscious strategy of letting his imagination run amok over whatever he might find. His collages are satirical but don't so much gore their targets as subject them to freakish transformations. They dared to be funny at a time when laughter was as welcome in German art as radioactive waste. Pinpointing a cause for this rebellion, Duwenhögger explains that he was a Catholic boy who confessed to 'feeling sinful' early on, and has felt the same ever since, especially while making art, where his sins assume abundant and gorgeous forms.

Made in Hot Weather (1977–2014), an assortment of previously unseen works on paper from Duwenhögger's archive of private play and aesthetic adventure, was recently shown at RODEO gallery in London. The sky in many of these pictures comes in ice cream colours – delicious pinks, ruby reds and great volcanic oranges – providing ravishing backdrops that recall the glory days of Hollywood melodrama. Surreal confections and weird beasts cavort with the vulpine playboys familiar from his paintings. These are works dense with mischief in which the contents dance across the page. The pieces conjured when he was an adolescent brim with all the anarchic energy and breathless longing you'd expect from someone so young.

RODEO supplies no Jean Genet-style mugshot of the artist as a young man but, on meeting Duwenhögger, who is now in his late 50s, I find he's still alight with excitement and wicked humour, keeping up an erudite monologue in a Soho bar for about five hours. Outside, London in mid-December looks smudged in the gloom, all waxen cloud and damp concrete with the sun buried somewhere unknown; nothing could sound more fantastically distant than the world Duwenhögger maps out in the course of his conversation. He remembers Rome's feverish heat when he staggered around the city as a lost teenager, then recalls what it was like to find Rainer Werner Fassbinder – 'a wounded beast in a black leather jacket' – sitting next to him in a bar, before pausing to contemplate his childhood infatuation with the girls in Auguste Renoir's paintings. Happily, he never shook it off and takes this as the first sign that he was ill-suited to a German art education – confessing a taste for such dreamy Romanticism was strictly taboo in the 1970s – and precociously aware of his sexuality: a sensitive boy in every way. Once you're drawn in, it's obvious that you're receiving a rapturously homoerotic history of the last 100 years that also takes in much of Germany's vexed past. As night falls, Duwenhögger asserts: 'I have never been a contemporary artist,' and describes his work as the testament to a life spent out of step with his surroundings, following his own aesthetic impulses and much-cherished 'childish curiosity' down whatever rabbit hole it might choose. Sixteen years ago, he left Berlin for Istanbul, as if to make this long-felt isolation literal, and he now inhabits 'an entire world that's disappeared from view'. He insists that the dates attached to every piece in the show are out by a few years: he was younger than you thought.

Nestled discreetly among the company of dazzling creatures on the walls of rodeo was a talismanic figure: *The Golden Boy* (1980), a snapshot of an anonymous waif in his mid-teens, slender as a fawn and as radiant as an angel in a summertime field. Turned golden thanks to Duwenhögger's manipulation of yellow paper and a photocopier, the image is suffused with honeyed kitsch, looking as if it was liberated from a 1970s Vogue shoot dedicated to Tadzio from

the cinematic adaptation of *Death in Venice* (1971). The mirage-like texture transforms him into a suitably spectral blur while a goofy voyeur ogles him from the edge of the frame: longings are announced and then smartly unsettled. Some of these works on paper were assembled in Rome, Duwenhögger says, from ‘found materials collected on my lonely promenades through the city’ that soon led him into the countryside where he discovered ruins incongruously ‘covered in pornography’. Still ‘rich with the dirt of the place’, all his collages are oblique mementoes of his youth.

A year ago, Duwenhögger chanced upon Walter Abish’s novel *How German Is It* (1981) in a bookshop in Istanbul and was struck by the cover photograph of the author astride a horse in the shallows of a sea. (The absence of a question mark in its title is intentional: Duwenhögger calls this ‘a sign of genius’.) This discovery throws an extra shade of strangeness onto the contents of Duwenhögger’s show because the novel is a collage, too, a deadpan epic of domestic eeriness spun from the dullest of commercial texts (travel brochures are among Abish’s favourite sources) and set among the German *haute-bourgeoisie* that surrounded Duwenhögger in his childhood. A country still seething with the ghosts of its immediate past but concealing them through artificial merriment, this would be a very odd place to find yourself as a child: everything seemed to be hiding secrets of a distinctly queasy kind. At the centre of *How German Is It* lies the scene in which a character looks through a colouring book titled *Unser Deutschland* (Our Germany), examining page after page of ordinary tableaux such as ‘a massive-looking beach-house [...] a densely wooded area [...] a woman walking a dog on a leash’. There’s also an educational scene that must be familiar to everyone: ‘Framed in the classroom window was a pleasant, tranquil-looking landscape. At least two of the students were inattentive, one furtively reading a note, while the other was dreamily gazing out the window.’ Reveries about what lies beyond the confines of the classroom should always lead to mysterious places. Perhaps deep inside that ‘tranquil-looking landscape’, you might come across the scene contained in the 2003 painting *Perusal of Ill-Begotten Treasures*, which was included in Duwenhögger’s first retrospective at the Kunstverein in Hamburg the following year. A quartet of thieves is sprawled on dark grass examining its loot – banknotes, an oriental vase, an unknown portrait in a rococo frame – as if at a picnic. They look like five depictions of Marcel Proust, even the one who’s unluckily bald. There’s an intimation that once everything is catalogued they might enjoy a game of lawn tennis together, though the promise of, shall we say, more energetic activity hangs in the air, too. A figure looks on from the shade, unnoticed by others and studying this scene of illicit mischief in what’s unmistakably a cruising glade at late afternoon. An elaborate game is occurring here between what’s hidden and paraded: rival subtexts tease you, knowing they

will never be completely unravelled. For those immersed in queer life's long history of secret symbols, all sorts of clues are waiting to be found.

The juvenile Duwenhögger was far more exuberant. The watercolour *State of Affairs* (1982) turns the cover of a sketch-book into a deviant daydream that might make Pier Paolo Pasolini blush. Funfair-bright, it's a portrait of an aged shepherd and his kneeling apprentice at work in a pastoral setting – so far, so dopily idyllic. But it transforms into a subversive joy through the addition of a thought-bubble disclosing the master's hot dreams of cartoon sodomy. The gleeful shock of this erotic outburst is intensified by the camp fastidiousness of the surroundings, glowing in a painted rainbow of comic-book colour. Smut, that much-maligned aesthetic trait, rarely achieves such delicate expression. But the more oblique treatments of queerness in Duwenhögger's work can be equally astonishing.

In 2006, the artist proposed *The Celestial Teapot* as a public sculpture to preside over a memorial site for 'the persecuted homosexual victims of National Socialism in Berlin'. Plump and green with its spout concluding in a man's limp hand – an exquisite surreal conjunction – this object sits upon a helter-skelter staircase hidden inside a grand watchtower. As Duwenhögger recalls, sketches were dutifully submitted to the admissions board and, at once, the proposal was talked of 'like the frivolous work of the devil!' Anyone claiming Satan inhabits an object as innocuous as a teapot misses its fidelity to a certain queer spirit of compulsive irreverence. A tea party in a cemetery would certainly fall into this category but should never be mistaken for actually dancing on a grave, which is a far more serious thing. A fierce response is to be expected when you play such games and, although Duwenhögger claims he never intended to provoke the uproar that followed, it was unquestionably part of the fun. What he's rarely asked is whether this commitment to lightness might require just as much hard work as its opposite and come with its own collection of frightful risks. Dreary totems for the dead abound and have long been commonplace: what could be more explosive than suggesting something whimsical, instead? Look carefully and what seemed to be mere decorative candy-floss a moment ago suddenly contains all sorts of fevered longing. *Love in Flight from the Digital World* (1979–2014) is just such a melancholy surprise. The show's equivalent of a heart-breaking aria, it's a theatrical collage in bruised purples and screaming pinks that shows a shy Cupid, fatefully adorned with a pair of monstrous wings. (Dwell on the span of those dates, too, which elegantly condense a long journey from crazed youth to wayward middle age.) The backdrop is a pixelated landscape; red-velvet curtains loom. The mood of scarcely suppressed camp hysteria makes it all the more tragic. This might be a veiled self-portrait that sees Duwenhögger imagining himself in Cupid's

role as a cursed changeling, but in flesh and blood he's more defiant, totally bound to what he calls 'my ludic inclinations'. Perhaps a sense of elegy lingers but you can't help what you fall for. Your heart, that mischievous devil, announces this with a burst of unexpected sparks. You can chase them into old age but, as every smart boy knows, Cupid's arrows are never carelessly shot.

<https://www.frieze.com/article/ill-begotten-treasures>

RODEO