

Coming in Second

Solo Presentation, November 2022

Invited by At The Printing Table

<https://attheprintingtable.com/artists/mariella-lehner/>

Mariella Lehner scratches at the shine of fame. Where the neoliberal maxim of success has become the measure of our social status, the artist pierces through the porous shell of appearances and exposes the fragility that is inevitably inherent in any triumph. With her works that span printmaking, painting, and sculpture, this artist asks us to look into the abysses of our quest for social recognition.

To this end, the artist begins by seducing our eye, trained on order and rationality, with taxonomic arrangements suggesting uniformity, but also with life-size dimensions. "Precious and Precarious" (2022), for example, a work reminiscent in its organization and monochromatic color scheme of Marlene Dumas's portrait series from the 1990s, consists of a multitude of evenly spaced plaster prints, each the size of an e-book.

While Dumas usually positions an image in her series in such a way as to interrupt the logic of conformity, in Lehner's work it is the technique of monotype that makes each of these plates unique and consequently banalizes the implied normativity of the work.

This form of manipulation also returns in Lehner's engagement with surfaces, nonchalantly appropriating the deceptive appearance of the exterior on this level. By often layering different techniques on top of each other, the artist makes it difficult for us to penetrate the pictorial motif, as in the life-size paintings "Peacemakers" (2022) or "On Power and Impotence" (2022). Thus she provides sections of charcoal and pastel chalk with a veil of airbrush and supplements them with layers of Japanese paper. Subtle folds emerge, making the surface of the picture appear like a protective skin infiltrated by veins.

This effect, this corrupting of the underlying motif, is to some degree always inscribed in the logics of printmaking, and then recurs in Lehner's more classical etchings, such as "Tristesse" (2019): impressions, as in this case on plaster, always embody (albeit minimal) distortions of originally sharply engraved lines on shimmering metal plates. With regard to Lehner's practice, one could thus interpret prints as a kind of stand-in for a "publicity-shy," "mystified" etching. This mystique, this aloofness of the original, thus seem to make the printing technique almost a consequent medium for Lehner. For are they not essential factors in the construction of social fame?



¹ Marlene Dumas, Betrayal, 1994. Private collection, Courtesy David Zwirner/Ph: Emma Estwic, New York © Marlene Dumas



³ Mariella Lehner, Peacemakers 2022



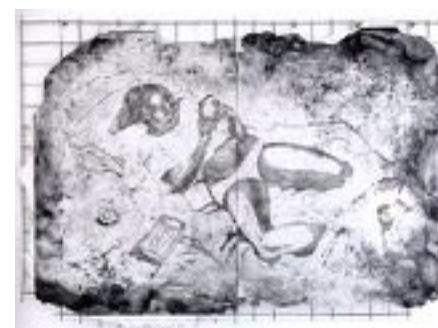
⁴ Mariella Lehner, On Power & Impotence, 2022

But Lehner's artistic strategy does not dwell on the mere affirmation of the illusion of the external. The artist forces us much more to look into the depths of the image, to uncover its motive. Thus, in the series "Precious and Precarious" we then also recognize a finely coiffed poodle with bared teeth in reference to its descent from the wolf. We catch sight of an edelweiss, which is coveted as a souvenir in the alpine region, but as such is threatened with extinction. As the title of the series already states: every reputation is relative.

With this premise in mind, Lehner turns to equestrian sports in her latest series of works, "Coming in second" (2022). The artist cites the incident at the Modern Pentathlon at the 2021 Olympics as the origin of this interest. At the time, the rider Annika Scheul lost her gold medal in the fourth discipline, show jumping, which she had already thought was secure, after the horse "Saint Boy," which had been assigned to her, simply refused to jump. In her new works, Lehner depicts horses and riders at the moment of their fall, focusing on the act of supposed failure. By including animals, as they regularly recur in Lehner's practice, the artist urges us to change our perspective: from the horse's point of view, isn't the fall, isn't the refusal to perform (apart from the often fatal consequences) also a form of self-empowerment, of victory over the currencies of human success? With gestures like these, the artist not only exposes the simultaneities of success and defeat, but also unmasks the neoliberal compulsion to succeed as a man-made, absurd dilemma.

At a time when social platforms not only catalyze but also capitalize superficiality and success as guarantors of social value creation, Mariella Lehner exposes the fragility of this very rhetoric. This artist locates profit and advantage much more as an immaterial value in the broad interdependencies between humans and more-than-human beings.

Text (translated from German): Friederike Sperl



⁵ Mariella Lehner, Tristesse, 2019



⁶ Mariella Lehner, Edelweiss, Precious & Precarious, 2022