

Nata Togliatti Delightful Escape

Nata Togliatti's diploma project „Delightful Escape” is conceived as a holistic installation, in which the artist juxtaposes two of her ongoing work series: Her “Cave Paintings” stretching across the walls are executed on packaging material. They all feature the same motive of an ornamental blossom. Hanging each piece in a loose grid, the artist purposefully evokes an aesthetic alluding to tapestries. In contrast to the painterly haptic works on the walls, the floor is covered with glazed sculptures. They are all hand-made and take the shape of lemons in different sizes. They too derive from a series of works, in which each singular piece is titled “maidservant.”

Nata Togliatti's handling of the ornament and her handmade ceramics in the context of contemporary art remind of a specific moment in the Western history of art when the pattern was decidedly freed from a subordinated context of the decorative. Representatives from the American 1970's *Pattern & Decoration* movement (in short: *P&D*) called upon century-old, non-western image traditions, wherein flatness and repetition were celebrated. These were things already referenced in the Avantgarde of the early 20th century, but what was specific about *P&D* is that its representatives began questioning socio-political mechanisms, which caused an initial divide into high art of painting and crafts. One of the conditions *P&D* artists particularly denounced was the suppression of women into anonymous makers of decorative objects.

Nata Togliatti's paintings do not stem from an art-historical enquiry into *P&D* but originate from a personal context of her grandparents' flat, where she spent her childhood summers. Just before her grandparents moved out, she captured the ornamental wallpapers of their interior design. In her first “Cave Paintings” she deliberately took inspiration from these encapsulated memories, whereby ‘cave’ is thought to indicate memory's potential to emotionally revive a place that is no longer physically existing.

It is possible, however, to establish a connection between Togliatti's specific investigations into the ornament and the *P&D* artists that preceded her: in her diploma work, Nata Togliatti has shifted her focus from the once nostalgia-loaded object to the ornament as *central issue in the context of painting*. In this, she literally places the ornamental taken from industrially produced wallpapers into her composition's center. In terms of technique, her way of painting the ornaments by hand is a reference to ornamental art in early cultures. Back then, the ornament was situated on the fringes to ‘serve’ as an atmospherically enticing component towards a central composition.ⁱ This characteristic remained with the ornament throughout the centuries and even finds itself present in industrially produced wallpapers, though indicating ideas on taste and prestige from bygone eras.ⁱⁱ Nata Togliatti brings both – crafts and décor, back into the game, hereby also restimulating the discourse around hierarchies prevailing in certain genres and techniques.

Togliatti paints each blossom by hand, in slight variations of color and with subtle deviations from the original pattern. Herein lies again a reference to the high art of ornamental embellishment, where craftspeople too played around with alterations. Though in contrast to classical ornamental art, Nata Togliatti paints with coarse brushstrokes. The way she applies thick paint suits the idiosyncratic surface of the packaging material. These overpacks literally *back* the food industry, in a sense they can be seen as emblems of global trade chains.

The sculptural pieces insinuating lifelike lemons spread across the floor either remind of accidentally scattered fruit or a labyrinth of carefully placed obstacles. Their ceramic materiality, and especially the varnish underlines the fragility of the manufactured, organically curved surface. The citrus fruit has been associated with seductive powers in both mythological and religious texts. In the early bible context, the citrus fruit was even believed to be the forbidden fruit.ⁱⁱⁱ This biblical connotation puts the lemon in direct connection to Adam and Eve – the protagonists of the Fall – but especially in connection to Eve, who is seen as the embodied allegory of seduction.

With all this in mind, one is now left to wonder whether Nata Togliatti's installation "Delightful Escape" truly resembles a living interior or rather something entirely different – a contemporary rendition of the panel painting "Paradise Garden" by Upper Rhenish Master, ca. 1410/20.^{iv}

In this medieval work, the painter included allusions to both the sacred context of the closed, virginal garden as well as to profane pleasantries. In similar regards, Nata Togliatti's diploma work also moves between a set of changing meanings: On the one hand, she reveals mechanisms of our capitalist consumer culture, while on the other hand she raises questions of cultural belonging between personal and collective memories.

At last, Togliatti's deep enquiry into the politics of symbols is also present at the level of her works' titles: The sculptures "maidservants" stands in direct dialogue to the paintings in which the ornament has been disentangled from its 'serving' position. In the end, the question remains of who and what is serving whom, and to which purpose.

Text by Tatjana Schaefer, Assistant Curator, Pinakothek der Moderne

ⁱ Busch, Wemer; Maisak, Petra; Weisheit, Sabine (eds): *Die Verwandlung der Welt: die romantische Arabeske*, Petersberg: Michael Imhof Verlag, 2013, p. 13-27

ⁱⁱ Mende, Sandra. *Ornamentik im Industriedesign*. Munich: GRIN Verlag, 2008

ⁱⁱⁱ Doosry, Yasmin; Lauterbach, Christiane; Pommeranz, Johannes (eds): *Die Frucht der Verheißung. Zitrusfrüchte in Kunst und Kultur*. Nürnberg: Germanisches Nationalmuseum, 2011

^{iv} Upper Rhenish Master, Paradiesgärtlein, ca. 1410/20, Städelmuseum, Frankfurt am Main