

Bright Lights, Big City

Julia Münstermann

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A recurring theme in the paintings of the German artist Julia Münstermann is the city at night. We see a neon sign on the wall of a building, the brightly illuminated display window of a perfume store, the lobby of a hotel, the gleaming façade of a modern office block. The interiors are empty, the streets deserted. It is not so much the buildings that are the subject here as the light of the neon tubes and the reflections of the coloured lamps on glass, steel and marble. On more than one occasion, we look through windows that have reflections in the glass, clouding the difference between interior and exterior. Dancing lights and a warm glow create an enchanting sparkle that softens contours, erases distances and makes us forget time.

Although based on photos that Münstermann has taken of specific locations in Las Vegas, Kyoto, Berlin and other big cities, the paintings speak first and foremost of the anonymous, identical urban space of industrial estates, business districts and shopping malls of the kind that can be encountered all over the world in this modern age of globalisation. Münstermann's work is not a criticism of planners who have elevated the experience economy to a priority; it is more a case of amazement at the seductive, sometimes bewildering, appearance of the modern metropolis that never sleeps. In this respect, these cityscapes are a contemporary version of the shop display windows painted by August Macke at the beginning of the twentieth century, depictions that may be seen as a prelude to the 24-hour economy. In, for example, *Großes helles Schaufenster* (Large Bright Shop Window, 1912), in the collection of the Landesmuseum in Hanover, the magic of electric light combines with the allure emanating from an opulent display of desirable merchandise. Münstermann shows us the supermodern city as a display window, as a disorienting dream-world that has more in common with the illusions of painting than with reality.

Whilst painters such as David Schnell, Sophia Schama and Martin Kobe paint apocalyptic architectural visions in perfectly straight lines, polished surfaces and synthetic colours, Julia Münstermann's paintings are intuitive explorations of the metropolis as a gigantic, ethereal film set, bathed in an unnatural light. However familiar it may be, the cityscape that these works lay before the eyes of the viewer is strange and artificial, as though it were a simulation, a copy of reality that mimics our dreams and desires, just like the photos of perfect interiors on the websites of hotel chains, property developers and travel agencies. What appears to be the reflection of reality is in fact a disguise. The city, coloured by neon light and partly shrouded in darkness, appears as though in a film, glamorous and deceptive.

Some of Münstermann's metropolitan nocturnes bring to mind the description J.G. Ballard once gave of his favourite building in London, the Michael Manser-designed Hilton Hotel at Heathrow Airport:

'It's part space age-hangar and part high-tech medical centre. It's clearly a machine and the spirit of Le Corbusier lives on in its minimal functionalism. It's a white cathedral, almost a place of worship, the closest to a religious building you can find in an airport. Inside it's a highly theatrical space, dominated by its immense atrium. Most hotels are residential structures, but rightly, the Heathrow building plays down this role, accepting the total transience that is its essence, and instead turns itself into a huge departure lounge, as befits an

airport annex. Sitting in its atrium one becomes, briefly, a more advanced kind of human being. Within this remarkable building, one feels no emotions and could never fall in love, or need to. The National Gallery and the Louvre are the complete opposite, and people there are always falling in love.' [1]

Steering a course between the flat surface and the suggestion of atmospheric and perspectival depth, Julia Münstermann's work flirts with abstraction without crossing the threshold of non-referential painting. A figurative painting such as *Untitled (Mondrian)* (2006) displays her abstract qualities in the interplay of its shapes and the effect of its colours, just as an abstract painting such as *Victory Boogie Woogie* (1942-1944) by Piet Mondrian is able to evoke the hectic streets of New York, the rhythm of jazz and the excitement of the new world. The distinction between figuration and abstraction, once an ideological struggle between tradition and innovation, has lost its relevance in contemporary painting. There is a difference, as crucial as it is obvious, between what the painting is and what it refers to. The essence of every painting is not the motif, nor the opaque interplay of observations, experiences, intentions and ideas that was the driving force behind its creation, but the pictorial image itself, constituted as a 'self-supporting' phenomenon in which all of the details belong to the configuration of the whole and may only be seen in their relation to each other - 'seen related, not seen and then rationally related', as philosopher Susanne Langer specifies. [2] Painting is the act of making distinct that which can be seen, not that which can be named. It is in its nature to show, not to tell.

The supermodern world shown to us by Julia Münstermann reflects the new urban bewilderment of the third millennium. 'The world of supermodernity,' wrote Marc Augé, 'does not exactly match the one in which we believe we live, for we live in a world that we have not yet learned to look at. We have to relearn to think about space.' [3]

[1] J.G. Ballard quoted in: Hans Ulrich Obrist, *Interviews. Volume I*, Edizione Charta, Milan, 2003, p. 66.

[2] Susanne K. Langer, *Problems of Art: Ten Philosophical Lectures*, New York, 1957, p. 178.

[3] Marc Augé, *Non-Places, Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, Verso, London/New York, 1995, pp. 35-36.