

Dirk von Lowtzow

Fire and Ice

A visit to Dirk Bell

The art of Dirk Bell is best approached in tangential, not to say devious ways. These take me to his studio in the strange no-man's-land between Berlin-Mitte and Wedding, to a little side street leading to a building site, where one of the tram lines that are characteristic of East Berlin ends. The street is the sort of non-place you feel homesick for when you're ensconced at home; only a few years ago you still stumbled on them at every turn East Berlin.

Perhaps it is such places, streets like these where everything is vague and nothing seems firmly established, vacant shops, torn-up cobble-stones and similar lingering romantic attributes, that still today make Berlin seem full of promise for artists like Dirk Bell – who is, I believe, working doggedly (or perhaps not) to circumnavigate the cliffs, and who constantly sets new traps for himself and just as constantly evades others.

Contrary to all my expectations Dirk Bell's studio does not turn out to be an Aladdin's cave. It is more like a somewhat disorganised flat on the second floor of a newly renovated block.

Its denizen offers his visitors tea.

Dirk Bell takes me into the 'library', where, besides a collection of books, catalogues and drawings, he keeps a large hoard of issues of 'Perry Rhodana', 'Atlan' – (son of Atlantis) and 'John Sinclair' pulp novels (demon's whips). He recounts how profound an impression the style of the title illustrations made on him in his youth and his student years, and how it still arouses enthusiasm in him today. Some of the covers he finds especially fascinating, since besides their obvious 'production-line' character, they manifest genuine 'artistic' features. So some of the structures of the extra-terrestrial rock formations recall Max Ernst's Decalcomania.

Another major influence, of which there are still traces in works from earlier exhibitions at BQ, his home gallery in Cologne (*Why are my friends such finks*, together with Friedrich Kunath, 1998), is spread out, seemingly randomly, before me, in the form of loose leaves of drawings that look like rough sketches: horses and barbarians, with eccentric curved horns, female figures and bizarre landscapes. Quickly drawn on paper with

Indian ink and heavily shaded, they point to the archaic kitsch pictorial world of the American comic-book artist Frank Frazetta.

The latter's 'major work', the cartoon film *Fire and Ice* which he made together with Ralph Bakshi (well known for the adaptation of *Fritz the Cat* after Robert Crumb, and for his *The Lord of the Rings* almost 25 years before Peter Jackson) is also avowedly one of Dirk Bell's favourite films. I am slowly beginning to believe that the fantasy boom in the early 80s, which people like to write off as the height of escapism, must have left an almost indelible impression on people of Dirk Bell's (and my own) age group.

What makes Frazetta, H. R. Giger, Leonor Fini or even the notorious Bruno Bruni so interesting for Dirk Bell as draughtsman and artist, and also makes them important points of reference, is that, judged by artistic criteria, they move on to decidedly uncertain territory. Just as Dirk Bell's studio lies in 'the no-man's-land' between hippy Mitte and proletarian Wedding, the artists named above operate in a kind of intermediate world between the poster galleries and the art business. Dealing with figures who inhabit a kind of 'intermediate zone' which one can only approach in zigzag fashion (to quote Tarkovsky's *Stalker*, another of his favourite films) avoids, according to Dirk Bell, becoming hooked on the art business and appeals to him more than 'running around the Academy all the time with a copy of *Flash Art* under your arm.'

So his affinity to fantasy illustrators, commercial realists and airbrush artists seems to be less a coy flirtation with 'low art', or an attempt to achieve a form of distinction from flirting with genres generally held in contempt, and more a necessary manoeuvre in order to avoid premature consolidation with the art business. Berlin, perhaps mainly for that reason, also seemed and seems full of promise to artists like Dirk Bell, because widely publicised 'cheap rents' and empty premises to make it a relatively simple matter to find a niche, in which to stay outside the gallery business. So before now Dirk Bell has often worked as bar owner or co-owner, for example at the *Apotheke* (Pharmacy) in the Schönhauser Allee, which still looks a bit like a grotto, and he worked on an edition of *Freier - Magazin für Befindlichkeit*, a magazine produced by the working group 'Neue Dokumente'. In addition to all this he is trying his hand at producing jewellery.

In all this Dirk Bell's approach shows none of obsessive pursuit of instant success with which you are often confronted in the case of similar artistic positions. As delicate and literally 'masterly' as this many of his large-scale drawings may be, his approach is devoid of excessive reworking. These drawings seem to me rather to be the result of a sustained performative gesture that follows a quite unpremeditated path. Like his idol William Blake, Bell works 'only when [he has] to do so, commanded by angels'. This approach to the subject of the drawing is not part of a search for the exterior of the object of desire: that object rather corresponds to the internalised desire. That this is in Bataille's sense an erotic process (and I believe that Dirk Bell is a 'great eroticist') is clear at every stage of the work on a drawing. So a picture can have begun as a portrait of the head of one of Bell's women friends and then evolve in the somnambulistic working process into a return of Pontormo's *Leda*, in which her body changes into the body of a boy with an erect penis. This hermaphrodite creature is, as in Tchaikovsky's ballet *Swan Lake*, entwined in a kiss with a swan, which in turn emerges from an ephemeral web of lines, and is thus brought back from death into life. A similar motif can, in a detail, disengage itself in ghostly fashion from an offset print of Bruno Bruni lilies, just as the white chalk added to a faded flea-market picture of a woman playing a guitar can spread like ectoplasm.

These are transformations which emerge from the juxtaposition of different approaches, for Dirk Bell's world is the world of similarities and analogies, of the melding together of seemingly opposing principles, of Blake's 'marriage of Heaven and Hell'. Like the ambiguous figures in Gustave Moreau's pictures, or the protagonists in 'Lesbia Brandon' by Algernon Swinburne, the foremost English decadent, all the figures in Dirk Bell's pictures are linked by delicate relational bonds. The lovers look like brother and sister, the symbols of good and evil are fused together and reflect each other in double or triple fashion. There are no contradictions between age, sex or type: the secret, common and liberating sense behind every presentation seems to be the idea of incest.

The duality of light and shade, night and day, fire and ice – this is the symbolic ambivalence that forms the fundamental principle of Dirk Bell's most recent works, which, because of their upright format suggest representations of tarot cards, for example the famous *Alistair-Crowley-Tarot* from 1944 by the

English artist Frieda Harris. In a general way the more or less recondite doctrines of this English eccentric, who was a fervent Nietzsche admirer, yoga-master and Tantra-adept, pop with a fine regularity in Dirk Bell's work, even if only indirectly via the massive influence of Kenneth Anger, who for that matter also seems to be experiencing a resurrection at the present time in diverse contributions to journals, monographs and exhibitions. The ceiling fresco with which Bell decorated the BQ-stand at Art Basel, 2004, which was composed entirely of circular structures and seemed to point to the so-called 'Tree of Life' from the Jewish Kabbala, alludes to the same erotic traditions. If not earlier, then at least here, the viewer may well have an attack of vertigo.

However as I said at the beginning, the art of Dirk Bell cannot be filed under any unilateral rubric, and it does not exhaust itself in the enactment of topical clichés. Prominent as the late Renaissance, Symbolism, Romanticism and other esoteric features may be in a work which appears almost clandestine, it in any case seems somehow inappropriate to apply a questionable label like *New Romantic Painting* to him. Much in his attitude to current exhibition practice rather recalls the institution-critical art of the 90s, and so he was able to surprise us with echoes of the classical avant-garde: in the group exhibition *Jetzt und zehn Jahre davor* (Now and ten years ago) at Kunst-Werke in Berlin he showed two objects, one of them a collaboration with the artist Juliane von Solmsdorf, which had a suggestion of Man Ray or a threadbare version of Marcel Broodthaers. Dirk Bell is too sceptical about himself, about artistic 'intention', his procedures are too dialectical, his results are too surprising and un-cynical for his art to be classifiable as sentimental or to be related to a new sensuality. Dirk Bell has the ability to analyse his environment precisely, to break it down into fragments and reassemble the pieces like a kaleidoscope. The view from his window on to the adjacent *Charité* hospital shows that building rising out of the mist like a modern variant of Böcklin's *Toteninsel* (Isle of the Dead). His works, it seems to me, shift constantly between the posed and the authentic: things can change if you hold them against the light, a studio flat can turn into a *camera obscura*: Dirk Bell, in the dark, lets it prescribe his movements. Freely adapting a Gustave Moreau dictum, 'A good picture, if it is to correspond fully to the fantasy which produced it, must be constituted

like an entire world',¹ Dirk Bell is not content with satisfying needs, he creates the conditions required for these needs to arise in the first place.

1 Cf. Mario Praz, *Liebe, Tod und Teufel. Die Schwarze Romantik*, München 1994, p. 252.