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WELT AM SONNTAG

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## Bringing together what belongs together

### As Jan Krugier's right-hand man, he sold Picassos for millions -and then he stopped. Now, Akim Monet is back to surprise Berlin with works by Rodin and Kirchner



There was a time when Akim Monet presided over 200 tomato plants. He grew his own salad and chopped the wood he needed to heat his house. It wasn't that he had given up on art, but instead he took his leave from the world he had known: New York auctions and back room deals. One day he was selling Masterpieces and the next he was watering his vegetables and dedicating himself to his own art: Photography. Many did not understand his choice at the time. "If you ask me what was the dumbest decision in my life that fills me with the most pride, it would be this radical move", says Akim Monet.

One asked the question, but expected a different answer: perhaps a glamorous self-advertising anecdote from the wild youth of the gallerist, or a sleek statement from an experienced salesman. Instead Akim Monet delivered in just about 20 minutes a fascinating account of his life.

Sitting comfortably in a Berlin attic next to a small Auguste Rodin sculpture, listening to Monet's words, one has to admit that he really is a great story teller. From time to time, without even noticing he raises his voice in the manner of someone who is truly inspired. When he talks about his encounters with paintings by Matisse or pictures by Picasso he clenches his fists as if art was a dagger penetrating his guts. This can be a little intimidating, not everybody will cry a river over a Cézanne exhibition. Nevertheless, one should not be daunted by this, and what is in fact pleasant about Akim Monet is that he does not expect his listener to share his level of energy. His overflowing enthusiasm is not an act, it's for real.

And so, from his exhibition space in a period building in the courtyard of the former Tages-spiegel complex, the latest and most spectacular addition to the Berlin gallery scene tells the very entertaining story of his life. And it is good stuff too. Akim Monet was born into art 43 years ago. His mother, the legendary Swiss collector and art dealer Georges Marci filled her house with works by Degas, Claude Monet and Franz Kline and was close to artists such as Yves Klein. "One of my earliest childhood memories was a big, blue Monochrome by Yves

Klein that hung in our house”, recounts Monet. At the age of nine his mother first took him to the auction rooms, where he was told to write down the prices of all the paintings. “If there is something I inherited from her,” says Monet “it is hopefully her good eye and the ability to distinguish the good from the bad between two almost identical paintings”.

Through his family he naturally became acquainted with many important people in the art world, and these contacts soon became useful; after studying comparative literature Monet operated a small gallery in a hotel in Gstaad. At an early age he showed artists such as Arman, César, John M. Armleder and he obtained works by Marcel Duchamp for his exhibitions. Later he worked as the right hand man for the New York gallerist Jan Krugier, who handled artists like Balthus and Giacometti and who managed the Picasso estate. For three years Monet sold paintings and organized private previews in auction houses for Jan Krugier. Then came September 11, 2001 and the decision to change his life: tomato plants instead of twelve-million-dollar pictures. Monet and his wife moved to a rundown house in the gorgeous landscape somewhere between Rome and Florence: the best folly of his life and a financial disaster. “After 2002, the market for contemporary art literally exploded and I missed it all,” says Monet. “Some good friends of mine became incredibly rich and we had nothing of that nature.”

By no means does Monet regret the past, nor does he suddenly want to become insanely rich. But now, as he says, he is back in business. And if he ever had any anxieties as to whether he could still rely on his old network, he certainly need worry no more because the opening exhibition of the gallery -a group show titled “Fertility”- is one of the most remarkable events in Berlin this fall.

Here one can see works that are not visible anywhere else in the city, like the small Rodin sculpture “Torse d’Adèle” (1878) of which there exist only two casts: one in the Musée Rodin in Paris, and the other currently in this penthouse gallery in the “Tagesspiegel” courtyard. Jérôme le Blay, the author of the Rodin catalogue raisonné and a personal friend of Monet, helped to obtain this loan from a private collection and he also supplied this fitting anecdote: the young lady who posed as the model was in fact in the first months of her pregnancy.

Akim Monet named his Berlin exhibition space “Side by Side Gallery”, a platform from which he is able to articulate what was always his fundamental strength: showing that a deeper understanding emerges from the juxtaposition of things. He thus follows in the footsteps of his mentor Jan Krugier who often travelled back into the past so as to allow works by Picasso to enter into a dialogue with Lorrain or Delacroix. This is how, in Monet’s exhibition “Fertility”, the young pregnant lady of 1878 meets a blood-red Gouache by Louise Bourgeois from 2008, which depicts a baby immersed in a bloated belly. The artist was 97 years old then, but obviously still preoccupied with the cycle of life.

Another striking work in the exhibition is the large format Photograph “Frozen Semen With Blood” (1990) by Andres Serrano, which aesthetically could come from Abstract Expressionism, but in substance could be an iconic representation of in-vitro fertilization. Monet presents this somewhat abrupt photograph next to three monotypes depicting masturbation by Tracey Emin. An ever shriller clang results from this juxtaposition. Emin is generally known as a walking art scandal, but those who have forgotten what a superb draftsman she is need

only turn their head, comparing her sensitive strokes with the feverish lines of Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, in order to recognize a spiritual kinship. Considering that “Uber”-Expressionist Kirchner drew a naked couple in a relaxed post-coital moment on their bed as early as 1908, it is this sheet that is arguably the most scandalous work of the exhibition.

Practically speaking, “Fertility” is not an ideal theme for the opening of a gallery: hardly any glamour and slightly lacking distanced reflection; perhaps sentimental; even lightly feminist at times. On the other hand, it may be due to Monet’s very counter-position to the cool gallery scene that one finds him likable, and because without batting an eyelid he explains what brought him to his theme: his 3-year-old twins. “They were born in Berlin, I am Jewish and this makes me proud” says Monet. Here is somebody who is able to bare his soul to the world.

As a family man Monet is now under even more pressure to succeed. And since he does not represent any of the artists featured in the exhibition, he has to demonstrate what no one could believe until now: that one can in fact work as a Secondary Market dealer in Berlin. “Berlin has developed enormously over the past few years and for me it provides the ideal platform”, says Monet who also works as an art advisor. “Whenever I tell my international clients about Berlin, I immediately have their attention” and thus some of the Modern works in the show have been sold.

The last story Monet shares is one about how he had wanted to bid this summer at Christie’s on the desk of the legendary Swiss gallerist Ernst Beyeler, that he had wanted to have as a talisman for good luck. However when the price rose above 100,000 Euro, he thought it would be too foolish. Now he is investing in what is really important to him. Art.

## Leser-Kommentare

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