

The Joy of *Schadenfreude*

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By Carmen Böker

Various languages—to wit English, French, Italian, Spanish, Portuguese and Polish—have to employ the German loan word to express the concept of *schadenfreude*. It appears that the enjoyment we derive from witnessing the misfortunes of others is as typical for this country as other exported terms, such as *kindergarten* or *rucksack*. Or maybe it is just the particular combination of pleasure and guilt that we experience in these situations. It is difficult to condemn *schadenfreude* within the framework of conventional morality—it is just too light-hearted and cheerful to cause real offence. It is a kind of insurance: we promise to be good while having learned to accept as a matter of fact the daily cruelties, whether big or small. They are part of life, from Grimms' fairy tales to the daily dose of news from around the world.

In Patricia Waller's adaptation therefore, Bambi does not only have to deal with the death of her mother, as in the Disney movie, but looks at us with faithful, breaking eyes while being cut up, with the meat cleaver still sticking in her back. As hideously as the usual patterns of cuteness are modified in this work, they also, in standard procedure, remove the underlying real terror to a safe distance.

Patricia Waller is a master when it comes to fathoming, in an amused manner, the ambiguous nature of accidents. Bad luck, disasters, and catastrophes are her specialty. Her crochet work gives palpable shape to the memorable quote from soccer: "First we had a streak of bad luck, and then misfortune befell us." Her children snuffed by bizarre accidents, her cuddly animals slaughtered by gardening tools, all these are cruel depictions of facts as they actually appear, but they are rendered in such a grotesque and caricatured manner that they invariably make us smile, whether we like it or not.

Owing to its technique her work consciously plays with the image of „the art of the house-wife,“ work of the kind that generally produces innocent, comforting, cozy objects. The time-consuming nature of the handicraft heightens the impression of care and dedication. Waller, however, adds the highest possible contrast to these human qualities in her works, supplementing them with the aspects of sensationalism, fatalism, evil premonitions, and an unbridled lust derived from the macabre. In her disproportionate combinations she demonstrates that all of these crude flaws

are quite naturally part of our character. And that it is our own responsibility to curb our fascination for the aesthetics of violence and the increasingly routine way we perceive it, and contain it within the moral and legal framework of our basic values. The dog clobbered by a bone thus appears as a victim of his own desires—and turns into a symbol of our own imperfections and cravings.

We experience the terror in her work in the processed, artificial form familiar to us from the movies and from art history. There we encounter blood much more frequently—fortunately—than in real life: buckets full of it with the Vienna Actionists, eruptive and spraying as far as the camera in the shoot-outs of Hong Kong movies. Patricia Waller, on the other hand, checks its flow in the neat manner that we know from the depictions of St. Sebastian, gives it the jelly-like texture and lavish raspberry color of the movies. Her streams of blood are not so much symbols of vulnerability as they are compact, flat, neatly ironed tongues, as succinctly controlled and kept from naturally spreading as seen in comic strips, a genre that is particularly casual with regard to deadly wounds and tragic cruelties. How many resurrections do we witness in a single episode of “Tom & Jerry?” Dozens.

It is no coincidence, therefore, that Patricia Waller has found her new characters in the world of “Looney Tunes” and the like. And that she lets them stew in the pot, as in the case of Tweety. The indigenous animals do not fare much better: the hare is impaled on a carrot, his companion in misfortune speared with a digging fork, the squirrel clobbered to death with a shovel. Cute how they are lying there as if they were sleeping—if it were not again for the blood ornaments and the murder weapons. And again we as beholders are exposed, this time in our “evaluation” of animals. The easier it is to use an animal as a pet the more difficult it becomes to kill it. He who has cuddled the rabbit in the pen too often—an animal, furthermore, that is quite superfluously associated with human qualities such as faithfulness and guilelessness—will be hard put turning it into Sunday’s dinner. Less well regarded species, however, might encounter staggering acts of violence from the gardener. Anyone taking over his own lot of land will be able to witness this mutation within himself when attacking snails with hedge shears. All Patricia Waller does is give voice to the aggressive potential inherent in all of us.

Oftentimes the *schadenfreude* is entirely that of the artist. In 1999, for instance, she crocheted an entire buffet, including a lobster, French fries, pastry, and a pig’s head complete with a carrot in its snout. The feast made of synthetic yarn was first exhibited in a Paris gallery, where the sight of these deceptively realistic snacks made the mouths of the visitors water and triggered such strong culinary cravings that they did not at first notice that the walls of the gallery were

empty. All those attending the opening more for its social function than its art surely must have felt caught red-handed.

That, too, is part of the theory and praxis of art history, which Patricia Waller considers an important subject matter for examination. In 2002 she presented, in the Galerie Deschler in Berlin, a one-man-show as a complete museum tour—starting from the African masks of the ethnological department and medieval knight's armors all the way to Surrealism and color field painting as the pinnacle of abstraction. The first object she crocheted after completing her studies of sculpture was a bomb: the fittingly defiant prelude to her endeavor of establishing a technique ridiculed as *petit bourgeois* and domestic in the realm of art.

In the early 1990s she faced an audience that did not necessarily want to read her appearance of conventionality as clever deception. In our days the viewer, when encountering crochet work, will no longer invariably and with a shudder associate it with covers for rolls of toilet paper complete with little pompons on the hat rest. Instead, he can go on the internet and research movements like “Knit-bombing” or trees wrapped in endless scarves. And ever since the credit crunch, joint crafting is again regarded as a subversive method of countering discredited consumerism with self-made objects.

Still, crochet work is not yet accepted as the material of great art. The fact that it has made a come-back in everyday life does not solve Patricia Waller's main question, why the craft of the artisan is so much higher regarded than needlework. She therefore continues to toy with the juxtapositions of the banal and the evil, of *kitsch* and the sublime, in order to overcome the artificially drawn line between high and low art. A triad of lethally struck ladies is arranged in a sculptural and sacral manner like the busts of popes. Fittingly this complex is entitled, both euphemistically and cynically, “Heavens' Pitfalls.” For the three graces have all been hit on the head, by an Airbus plane, a flat-iron, and a flower pot, respectively. All three flying objects have had a striking effect, and that is what counts.

The crochet-sculptress still secretly smiles when, on a train ride, she is asked what she is producing, and she prefers to answer “a romper suit,” rather than: a child being devoured by a shark. Or: a unicorn that has impaled a teddy bear. Miss Piggy, with her rocket-shaped bare breasts, however, was much too monumental for that. Her lower half has already passed through the meat grinder, fluffy strands in a wonderfully matured dark red pouring out. In order to arrive at the optimal simulation Patricia Waller had, of course, engaged in extensive research at

the meat counter. And had decided, for its nicer colors, to take her inspiration from ground beef rather than ground pork—sorry, Miss Piggy!