

SAND, SUN, BLUE SKY

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What is a desert? The Lexikon der Geographie [Encyclopedia of Geography] provides the following explanation: „[...] an area of the earth characterized by little to no plant cover, caused by a lack of water in the dry desert, by a lack of heat and in part by a lack of water in the cold and high mountain desert, and by a sheet of ice that covers the only conditionally associated frozen wasteland.“ [1] But do these definitions and natural parameters come to mind when we think about the desert? Don't we instead envision infinite expanses, unspoiled sand dunes, and searing sunlight? Don't we have romanticized images of oases, camel caravans, Bedouin camps, and mirages? Fine Bieler explores these questions in her work *Simulacrum* (2017/2018), in which she illustrates and examines how traditional literary narratives and images as well as films from the desert shape the German view of the world.

For *Simulacrum*, the artist arranges a blue color gradient in the exhibition space, which is attached to a wooden structure like a stage set. In front of it she places a raised wooden pedestal with sand scattered in waveforms and small elevations, as well as a spotlight. Painted on the wall is a military camouflage pattern in desert colors. Bieler is not interested in concealing the substructures or the technical, industrial character of the individual elements; instead, her work is openly constructed.

When visitors walk past the installation, the different elements form an image: the blue color gradient turns into the sky, the piled-up sand become desert dunes, which the spotlight bathes in glistening sunlight. The camouflage pattern on the wall becomes a sandy desert. The individual colors make up a maplike landscape. This fusion takes place primarily on an associative level. Visually, the elements merge most strongly when the visitors align themselves in front of the platform and the dune ridges push themselves in front of the apparently directly adjoining sky. The viewer is able to construct a personal image of the desert. The installation functions as a stage or backdrop for an image that is not only composed of sand, sun, and blue sky but is also charged with allegedly personal associations. Although desert regions are becoming increasingly attractive travel destinations — whether as package vacations or adventure holidays — a large number of Germans draw their ideas from classic adventure novels, films or travel reports, whose origins lie in the 19th century or centuries further back. These usually deliver romanticized 'oriental' images full of stereotypes and still make the desert a magical place or a fearsome, wild wasteland. The plots of these stories are often located in North Africa and the Middle East—regions of the so-called 'Orient'. The sources often describe not only the landscape, but also the inhabitants, their culture, and their customs. A certain originality, simplicity, and closeness to nature resonate in

many of the narratives, testifying to Western or European dominance. These unbalanced power structures from the past and present find their expression in the camouflage pattern on the wall. Human beings and the landscape blur into one image: sand dunes, wandering Bedouins, rulers and their harem as well as uncivilized, barbaric warriors, to name but a few of these stereotypes. Not only are the narratives a source of ideas about the desert, but also of prejudices that are all too readily adopted.

Bieler's work is aimed at confronting the viewer with his or her subjective ideas. The artist invites us to question prefabricated opinions and images to discover their origins. She places novels and films alongside her desert stage, which could serve as sources of those inscriptions. In the first presentation of the work in the exhibition space „a room that...“ at the Leipzig Baumwollspinnerei (2017), Bieler combined her installation (here still as a photographic triptych made of C-prints, which she attached to the wall with clamps) exclusively with text fragments from Karl May's 1892 novel *Durch die Wüste* [Through the Desert]. [2] In a showcase painted in the color Magic of the Desert, stories about the landscape and people that the protagonist Kara Ben Nemsi encounters on his journey through the 'Orient' could be read in various editions of the book. In the texts, Eurocentric perspectives were revealed to the observer, which both create a romanticized image of the landscape and its inhabitants as well as resonate with

[1] Detlef Busche, *Wüste* [Desert], in: Brunotte, Ernst [et al.] (Ed.): *Lexikon der Geographie* [Encyclopedia of Geography]: in four volumes, Heidelberg/Berlin: Spektrum Akademischer Verlag 2002, vol. 4, pp. 58-59, p. 58.

[2] The novel was published in 1892 under the original title *Durch Wüste und Harem* [Through Desert and Harem] as the first volume of the six-part *Orientzyklus* [oriental cycle] of the series *Carl May's Gesammelte Reiseromane* [Collected Travel Novels], later *Gesammelte Reiseerzählungen* [Collected Travel Narratives]. In 1895, at the urging of his publisher Friedrich Ernst Fehsenfeld, the title of the novel was changed to *Durch die Wüste* [Through the Desert].

the Europeans' feeling of superiority. It is noteworthy at this point to remind the reader that Karl May, one of the most widely read writers in Germany, did not travel to the 'Orient' until 1899. At the Museum of Fine Arts Leipzig, Bieler makes use of well-known films such as *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962) and *Queen of the Desert* (2015). She does not show the actual film sequences; instead, she projects the plot onto the wall in text form, with stage directions and dialogues appearing as subtitles. The otherwise empty video projection offers the viewer no visual clues. The imagination must be used to illustrate what has been written and transfer it into Bieler's desert scene.

By using films from the 20th and 21st centuries, Bieler shows that the clichés of the desert usually run unaltered through time. They cannot be seen as a genuine phenomenon of the past—for example in the 19th century, when the European expansionist urge led military troops, researchers, and adventurers as well as artists and writers across the borders of Europe. The artist already recorded this continuity in 2017 through the use of different editions of May's novel, which has been reprinted over the years. She shows that traditional views are still widespread in society, although these opinions should have long since become obsolete and the public should have a differentiated view of the world. In recent times, pictures and reports showing the current construction boom in Dubai, for example, seem to change European ideas and open up new perspectives.

It remains to be seen whether these new images can replace the usual notions.

The title of Bieler's work *Simulacrum* is based on her interest in Jean Baudrillard's (1929–2007) media-theoretical approach, [3] according to which people live in a world shaped by the flood of images in the mass media, in which image and reality can no longer be kept apart. The picture shifts itself before reality and defines it, or — as the artist shows — narratives by Karl May and films like *Lawrence of Arabia* create the image of the desert. At the same time, the installation represents a reference to the thoughts made by Roland Barthes (1915–1980) about structuralist activity, which he formulated in the mid–1960s. [4] The French philosopher saw the aim of structuralist activity as “[...] to reconstruct an „object“ in such a way as to manifest thereby the rules of functioning (the „functions“) of this object. Structure is therefore actually a simulacrum of the object, but a directed, interested simulacrum, since the imitated object makes something appear which remained invisible, or if one prefers, unintelligible in the natural object.“ [5] Moreover: „Structural man takes the real, decomposes it, then recomposes it; this appears to be little enough [...] Yet from another point of view, this „little enough“ is decisive: for between the two objects, or the two tenses, of structuralist activity, there occurs something new, and what is new is nothing less than the generally intelligible: the simulacrum is intellect added to object, and this addition has an anthropological value, in that it is

man himself, his history, his situation, his freedom and the very resistance which nature offers to his mind.“ [6] Bieler literally breaks down the desert into its elements: sand, sun, sky, ideas from books and films. The artist invites the viewer to become active and to create a new image out of the individual elements.

Bieler sees her work as an opportunity to encourage viewers to question their worldview without acting didactically. In addition, *Simulacrum* serves the artist as a means of self-reflection to examine her personal views. The examination of the discourse about Orientalism plays just as much a role here as the reflection on the 'other' and 'strange' in modern times. The desert serves as a starting point to reflect on prefabricated opinions and ideas—beyond the space of the museum.

Translated from German by Erik Dorset

[3] See, among others, Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacres et simulation*, Paris: Galilée 1981.

[4] Roland Barthes, *The Structuralist Activity*, trans. by Richard Howard, in: *Critical Essays*, Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1972, 213-220.

[5] *Ibid*, pp. 214-215.

[6] *Ibid*, p. 215.