

Natascha Stellmach

The Book of Back

Epilogue

Mise en Abyme – Natascha Stellmach's poetic fracturings

Entering the installation *The Book of Back* is like stepping into a hall of mirrors. The setting is sparse with its few pieces of furniture and personal objects, bringing to mind a child's room. It is here where stories and images from the artist book of the same name have manifested and come together, including the book itself, to form this dark, intertwined interior. The book, with its prose and short stories from the artist's pen, staged photographs, works using scans, reproductions of Stellmach's objects and from family and found photographs, evokes a family story with its repressed dramas and secrets. At more than one location, it awaits open, beckoning the reader, but even here a reading of it is challenging, because the viewer has to either climb a ladder, stand in the corner or take a seat on a lopsided chair and then with their back to the door. The bed and the wardrobe too, are positioned in an ominously skewed way, "the home is a place where things can go wrong."⁷

⁷ Chris Rodley (ed.)
Lynch on Lynch,
Faber and Faber,
London 1997, pp. 9-10

Sinking into the dark poetry of the book, the reader is spun into a world within worlds, to a point of intense psychological discomfort. The narrative opens with the immigration of a young German couple to Australia, told in fragments and mainly from the perspective of their child, in whose room the viewer sits. The child is suffering under the new situation, being torn between worlds. In the second act, both typography as well as content suggest stories from the previous generation, in which tragedies such as war and abuse threaten to surface. A suicide is implied in the third act, in a book within a book, in addition to a surreal and bizarre tale where Kurt Cobain, Adolf Hitler, Diane Arbus, a dog and the Brothers Grimm meet in an outlandish twilight zone.

Looking up from the reading one notices other objects from the book: the tablecloth, on which fake blood is dripping; the pillowcase made from an Australian flag; the almost grotesque playmates, half animal, half doll; an empty frame on the wardrobe; and in front of it a kangaroo fur whose head is haplessly wedged under the furniture. Under the bed is a monitor on which a video appears in irregular intervals. The strange and twisted scenes originate from the artist's family Super 8 films and together with the haunting score by David Chisholm create a racy, oncoming nightmare. Stellmach transforms images from an apparent idyllic childhood into a disturbing sequence. There are also breaks, ironic references to popular culture that tone down the pressure: the video has the length of a film clip and its score utilises an AC/DC sample, albeit with its foreboding political undertone, from which the piece's title, *Oi Oi Oi* hails. Stellmach has also positioned the video, in a location like no other for the projection of childhood fears.

Stellmach frequently stands on a precipice for her works, bringing to the surface what most would rather leave unspoken. Subtly the theme of suicide creeps into the video *Meditations #1*, a collaborative work as BORIS + NATASCHA⁸. To a filmic image of a young woman lying naked on a bed, a lulling voice conjures up visualisations, at first pleasant, then ever slowly becoming stifling and dreadful, until it professes that suicide as a place of peace and safety is the best option. This is accompanied by the meditative composition of David Parsons. It remains ambiguous whether the voice is coming from the woman's self-talk or whether it is speaking to her, with the discrepancy between image and narration creating the tension. *How Insensitive*⁹ is a digital storybook that combines subtitles with a series of Stellmach's black and white photographs, edited so that the associations of these moments become more persistent and dark, strengthened by her text. The work pays homage to Chris Marker and particularly his film *La Jetée*, a benchmark in Stellmach's universe, and one whose ingenious use of non-linear narrative and parallel worlds is also strongly seen in the structure of *The Book of Back*.

⁸ BORIS + NATASCHA, *Meditations #1*, single channel video, 6,34", 2006, Edition of 5

⁹ Natascha Stellmach, *How Insensitive*, Digital Story Book, 3,05", 2005, Edition of 5

Natascha Stellmach's œuvre also carries autobiographical traits and the parallels between the fictitious family story of *The Book of Back*'s protagonist and the artist are apparent. Nonetheless a reading of her works at only this level, as an illustration of her experiences and existential orientation, would fall short. Stellmach seeks out contemporary realisations for timeless themes, for tragedies, fears and anxieties. These have long held a tradition in the history of literature and then film, conditions for which psychoanalysis provided a diagnostic vocabulary. Black Romanticism, the dark fairytale and its successors in popular music, these are references from which Stellmach derives her inspiration. When for example, expressing the motif of the broken soul, she delivers this in an approach that stems from and speaks to contemporary culture, allowing her fictional alter ego to literally reside between two worlds.

There is none better than the notion of the "Unheimlich"¹⁰ to describe many of her works. Freud explicitly describes the idea as belonging to the "domain of aesthetics" and then with the help of literary examples.¹¹ So it is no wonder that the "Unheimlich" re-emerged later in the film theory context and most recently, thanks to Mike Kelly, it has been haunting contemporary art.¹² If the "Unheimlich" implies that what has been repressed suddenly manifests, the trusted that is no longer trustworthy and the opposite of homely, then all these strategies are at work in *The Book of Back*. One especially sees the "Unheimlich" rear its face in the home, etymologically and notably film historically speaking, converting the homely picture into a portrayal of all that is ghastly.

That Natascha Stellmach projects these dark premonitions onto a child's room, a site that is often willingly seen as idyllic and carefree, makes this installation even blacker. Her child's room is a "place of distress"¹³, a visible expression of the situation of her protagonist, an actual state, but also a catalyst to create the creepy feeling of the "Unheimlich" in the viewer. And Stellmach ironically fractures the illusion, wherever things get almost too gloomy, when the blood that drips from the ceiling is so obviously a prop from the theatrical and film worlds, that one can peer behind the mirror again, for a moment.

¹⁰ "uncanny" although the German expression encapsulates much more, literally translated as (un)homely and implying exactly the opposite of what is homely (heimlich) or familiar, (translator's notes)

¹¹ Sigmund Freud, *Das Unheimliche*, in: Psychologische Schriften, Hrsg. von Alexander Mitscherlich, Angela Richards, James Strachey, Frankfurt/Main 1970, Studienausgabe Bd. IV, S. 243

¹² Mike Kelley, *The Uncanny*, Exhibition catalogue, Tate Liverpool, Museum Moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig Vienna, Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, Cologne 2004

¹³ Renate Gehrke-Riedlin, *Das Kinderzimmer im deutschsprachigen Raum. Eine Studie zum Wandel der häuslichen Erfahrungswelt des Kindes*, Dissertation Göttingen, 2002, S. 201