

## **The Images Find Me**

An interview with the painter Manzur Kargar

CH: When we met approximately 15 years ago, the theme of your paintings was Greek mythology. What was your fascination with that topic?

MK: I believe it is related to my heritage and to the fact that – having been born in Afghanistan and raised in Germany – I had difficulties finding my own identity as a young artist. Although I received my art education in Germany and learned to appreciate the local art traditions, I could never really connect to them. While trying to find my own authentic “language,” I arrived at Greek antiquity. As we all know, Greek antiquity – with its philosophers and mathematicians like Plato, Aristotle, Diogenes and Pythagoras – is the foundation for the European way of thinking (and consequently the way of thinking for all Western civilization) to this day. What was crucial to me was that Greek antiquity represents the gateway from the Orient to the Occident, and the myths and artistic and aesthetic manifestations in all their contradictory beauty suited my mindset. I felt comfortable in antiquity – there I could be “free,” and so it had a great influence on my earlier work.

CH: A few years ago there was a sudden change in theme and you began to develop an entirely new series: large-scale, beautiful, contemporary faces interspersed with geometrical patterns. What prompted you to depart from your previous (and extremely successful) style and when exactly did that occur?

MK: It was around the end of 2000 or beginning of 2001. I don’t know why, maybe it was the new millennium. One day I had just finished a painting from the series “Graces.” I sat down and lit a cigarette and suddenly I knew: This would be the last painting I would paint in this style. From then on everything had to change. Back then I had no idea in which direction it would develop, but I was certain that everything I had to say about antiquity I had already said. There was nothing more to say. Everything else would have been redundant. The fact that these paintings were very successful couldn’t influence my decision. Having dealt with things from the “past” for so long, I had the sudden urge to give way to the world of the here and now. In my studio I found a photograph that I had ripped out of an Italian fashion magazine. It depicted the face of a model that looked very “cinquecento” [CH: Italian for “five hundred,” a term used to describe the style of the Italian Renaissance of the 16th century] and originally I had wanted to use it for one of my female antiquity figures. I stretched a massive canvas and decided to fill it with a detailed view (only eyes, lips and nose) of this face. And there it was. It was classic and contemporary at the same time. I created an entire series of faces of models from all kinds of magazines, ads, etc. To offset the radicalism and closeness of these large faces, I added a layer of geometrical figures in contrasting colors. That created a distance to the faces, and the compositions were decentralized. With these “Close-Ups” I could finally paint faces where nobody asked: “Who is that?” Furthermore, I had a never-ending source of images for my paintings within this world of fashion and advertising. It was splendid!

CH: The “Faces” were your leap from antiquity into the 21st century. What happened then?

MK: While searching for more imagery for the “Faces,” I immersed myself deeper and deeper into the imagery of today’s media world, mostly advertising. Suddenly I discovered the wealth of motifs, stories and ideas the advertising world has to offer. Omnipresent and accessible to anyone, you don’t have to search, you simply find. This was followed by a

period where I approached my “image conception process” very experimentally and which resulted in the “Zapping Series.” Every evening I would videotape the commercial breaks (that other people would find annoying), replay them and then photograph the TV screen randomly without any specific purpose. This way, hundreds of photographs with all kinds of subjects were created: sometimes wiggly, sometimes blurry, but always surprising. Then I made a selection of photographs that I deemed “paintable.” These images were then executed in oil on small-size canvasses (15” x 15”). The absurdity that images which would only show for split seconds on TV would be recreated in the slow process of oil painting, which could take days to complete, created the special appeal of these works. Everyday items like chocolate, cars, skin lotion, etc., were banned to the canvas and this added a new dimension. The paintings of the “Zapping Series,” which were always presented “en bloc” as a wall installation, were somehow familiar to the viewers but at the same time it confused them, which played right into my intentions.

CH: Does that mean that you are very critical of the media/advertising world and its picture overkill?

MK: Not really. Rather, I am fascinated. Its glamour and seductiveness that interests me and inspires my work. Great art always has something to do with seduction. The church paintings of the Renaissance (the cradle of painting) had the purpose of seducing people to believe. Up to modern times, every work of art was basically meant to seduce – seduction in the sense of a promise or an ideal that we can strive for but in reality never reach in a lifetime. The spotless and slick surfaces were used to present to us a pure and paradise-like world. The same exact concept is used in advertising. Only the purpose has changed. For me as a painter, the “surface” is naturally of interest. How did Nietzsche say it in Birth of Tragedy? “The Greeks were superficial...as a result of their depth.” Which brings us back to the Greeks.

CH: Is it safe to say that you see yourself as a painter at heart? In a world where we are flooded with images (movies, TV, internet, magazines, billboards), even the art has evolved. Photography has a much greater significance than ever before. What does it mean to you to be a painter in a world of photography?

MK: First and foremost, I feel I am an artist. Painting is my medium. For me there is no other technique to express myself adequately. I think as a painter and I love to paint. Which doesn't mean that I don't appreciate or admire other more “contemporary” techniques. In my artistic education during the late 1980s in Germany, there was literally an ideological war of the disciplines. If you were a painter, you were automatically against photography, video art, installations or conceptual art, and vice versa. On the one hand, artists repeatedly declared the demise of painting, while on the other hand the painters claimed to work in the only true master discipline, referring to hundreds of years of tradition in art history. As a young artist, I defended my role as a painter on this battlefield with passion and strong belief. Today I feel this “battle” is pubertal and unnecessary. A strong video installation can inspire me much more than a badly executed painting. (Thankfully, these discussions don't take place much anymore among the younger generation of artists. There is a much more relaxed co-existence of the disciplines nowadays.) Of course I always ask myself the question: What purpose can a canvas – stretched on wooden bars, painted with oil colors – still serve in a world that is geared toward fast reproductions? But it is exactly a painting's non-reproducible, unique character that is its strength. The media and advertising world cannot make use of paintings for its purposes. For that, painting is too cumbersome. A painting can only work on a white wall in a quiet room without any distractions. To me, painting – as well as the viewing or contemplation of a painting – means to retreat from the flood of aggressive and hectic image

overkill. It is a way of meditation and concentration. If I can manage to sensitize the viewers' perceptions and enable them to see, even if just for a moment, then I have contributed much already as a contemporary painter.

CH: This also works for me. Every time I look at your paintings, I need to pause for a moment. I see fragments of images that look familiar, even though I can't say why or where from, and they melt together with other fragments that appear very foreign in that context. What feelings would you like to evoke with your paintings and what message would you like to convey? How do you choose the subject matter as you develop your composition?

MK: Basically, I would like to create paintings that are free of predetermined content. I don't have a "message." David Lynch once said in an interview: "If you (as an artist) have a message, write a postcard or an e-mail." I thought that was to the point. In the first place, I want to arrange form and color on the canvas. However, I am not an abstract painter. I am interested in the figurative, the human figure, volume, space and the interplay of foreground and background. In my current series, "Splendid," I try to approach the subject as open-mindedly as possible. The media world offers me a never-ending supply of colors and forms. Through the Internet, they are immediately accessible. About a year and a half ago, the computer replaced my sketchbook. Before I start working on a large painting, I spend many hours, or even days, on the computer arranging subjects of any kind to create a composition that works for me. When it comes to the selection of images, I leave it up to chance. The images find me. I only have to assemble them into a "proper and complete entity." Then, during the process of painting, there are other things happening. I work on a painting and drive it forward until it surprises me. The seemingly random assembly of various objects and images suddenly makes sense during the painting process. What sense that might be, I am not entirely sure of myself and that is the beauty of art...

The interview with Manzur Kargar was conducted by Christian Hohmann