

## *You live in interesting times*

Looking at the recent work of Paula Carralero Bierzynska – by Barbara Buchmaier

Recently, in the beginning of February 2020, at a little café in Berlin-Mitte, I heard a young woman say that she'd been wondering what it would look like if satellites were to record the end of the world. What would these images look like – what would one see in them? And who would see them?

A few days later I purchase a copy of "The Age of Surveillance Capitalism" (2018), a nonfiction book numbering several hundred pages by the American economist Shoshana Zuboff, which the artist Paula Carralero Bierzynska recommended to me after we had looked at her work together in her studio flat and discussed our current research and projects. It was just at that time that the activities of "Clearview AI" were disclosed – a small, little-known American start-up which programmed a very effective facial recognition software based on millions of photos retrieved from the internet without authorisation and which successfully sold it in the U.S. to law-enforcement agencies and intelligence services. That was something else we talked about.

Later I look at Paula's picture material on the computer. Including her last work, a 2.50 metres large vertical format before whose blue-green

background several smartphones that are interlinked with cables can be seen viewed from the top in flashlight mode. On one of the screens you can see a face – it is partially hidden behind a mask, the mouth is wide open. The work is titled "You live in interesting times".

Hearing this statement, perhaps someone will remember the last Venice Biennale (2019): "May You Live in Interesting Times" was the name of its central exhibition, curated by the American Ralph Rugoff. And it is no coincidence that Paula Carralero Bierzynska dovetails her work with it, only she turns the optative of the supposed original Chinese, ironically intended curse into an indicative. Yes, you live – we live – "in interesting times" – in an era of far-reaching changes, which we are witnessing. Climate change, wars, viruses, progressive digitization and de-democratisation or gentrification are only a few of the major factors that influence and complicate our daily life and challenge us to reflect critically, to rethink and maybe even to protest. But how, in what "medium" should we react, what perspective should we adopt, what alternative offers should we create? "Imagine Bernie Sanders in the Oval Office"! But back to art, to visual art.

Twenty-eight years old today, born in Madrid and a resident of Berlin since 2013, Paula Carralero Bierzynska has in recent years acquired a rare working technique that is quite unusual for our time. She paints with pigments mixed with linseed oil on, or rather behind, six millimetre-thick (plexi-)glass and thus revives an artistic technique practiced since antiquity – "reverse glass painting" –, whose fragile products once served those who commissioned it, including "as a representative curiosity, decorative wall ornament or for devotions as a sign of piety". Some readers probably remember that members of the artists' group "Der Blaue Reiter" ("The Blue Rider"), including Gabriele Münter and Wassily Kandinsky, were enthralled by this art

form at the beginning of the 20th century and practised it themselves after they had seen small-format, traditional Christian glass painting motifs in Murnau (Bavaria) and its surroundings.

Associated with the decision to do reverse glass painting are a number of challenges that differ considerably from those posed by classic painting on canvas: Since the colours are applied from the rear, one has to paint the images not only with the sides reversed, but turned around, so to speak, starting with the foreground as it were and working oneself backward. This means that from the outset images must be conceptualised differently. And corrections are virtually impossible.

The result is then viewed from the top. According to her own testimony, unlike many of her precursors in reverse glass painting – still a fairly young scholarly field of research – the self-declared left-hander Paula Carralero Bierzynska does not use models placed under the glass, but rather paints from memory – while standing in front of the often quite large (plexi-)glass plates, which are generally attached to the wall. She thus cannot observe, but only surmise, the result of her brushstrokes, the various steps of creating the picture.

The effect, however, is stunning and makes it possible for the artist to make a connection to the world of today, entering the context of the "interesting" world of electronic tools and communication, advertising and entertainment devices we use daily. For as we view the images captured behind glass, we have the optical illusion of looking at a switched-on LCD (= liquid crystal display) monitor, for we are looking through the glass, or rather the transparent synthetic material, directly at the paints applied to it from the rear, which shine intensively due to their bonding with the transparent material ... and are ourselves reflected in it as well!

But what does Paula Carralero Bierzynska have us look at, what does she direct our attention to? It seems to me, particularly in her most recent pieces, that the look itself becomes the focus: the look from above; this also holds true for the smartphone displays, which are titled with GPS coordinates and painted with images of the corresponding places, which you can only see if you hold them against the light. It is an analytical look at localities, one with which we are also familiar from satellite or drone shots that are available to everybody today. At the same time, however, the artist only shows us places that she herself, as she reports, has already visited in person and/or taken a closer look at from an elevated vantage point. And which she then later, like an author, brings to life with an individual cast of characters and little anecdotes.

Thus, for example, in the aforementioned "You live in interesting times" (2019), whose theme can be traced back to a walk the artist took on Hallig Nordstrandischmoor in Schleswig Holstein, which periodically gets flooded. From one of the interlinked smartphones visible in the picture, a woman with a mask over her nose looks toward you – that, too, was already suggested at the beginning. Judging by the facial appearance, which I can still recognize, it could be the artist herself. Is she wearing a protective mask here in order to ward off the vapours that are given off when painting with linseed oil? Or is she alluding to facial recognition programmes to which she wants to make herself unrecognisable? And what is she shouting to us through her open mouth? Would she like to draw our attention to the vulnerability of the barely protected marsh island at whose vegetation, awash with sea water, we are looking here? Or is she simply showing us an artist's cheeky selfie?

In the "Triptych of Retouch" (2019), for whose plexiglass plates, each measuring 250 x 125 cm, the artist chose the same side ratio as

that of smartphone screens, we move farther and farther from the ground as we track the three motifs. At first – according to Paula Carralero Bierzynska – we see a view of the Ruben Dario Viaduct in Madrid. Then a view of the building complex Nuevos Ministerios, a government building repeatedly modified throughout history based on the architectural model of the famous palace and monastery El Escorial. Construction of the Nuevos Ministerios began in 1933, and it has since been used by representatives of the various Spanish governments – republic, dictatorship, democracy. Some viewers may wonder whether the view was photographed by the smartphone held into the picture in the foreground ... In the third picture, which is most clearly reminiscent of a satellite image, we look through clouds at a landscape into which the two previous motifs have been incorporated.

Those who take a closer look may discover additional links between the contents as well as persons in the pictures. For instance, in the left-hand picture in the rear on the left there is a person and in the foreground there is a road-marking vehicle which each in their own way "paint" into the picture. In the middle picture we see people in formation who are in the process of marking the roofs of the building with white lines, as though in a utopian moment, and thus – visible from above as well – claiming it for themselves. Paula Carralero Bierzynska thereby makes it clear that in the case of her picture we're dealing with more than just an arbitrary reproduction of a mechanically generated (drone) photo or satellite image from the internet. Even if during her (post-)production she used such images, only to "retouch" them later. Just as she made various paper sketches in 2D and 3D and worked with a CAD programme in order to get the perspective of the building she desired.

Paula Carralero Bierzynska's "pictures of views",

at which we look as though at electronic screens, are clearly subjective. They blend her own viewing perspectives, physical experiences of walking into places, and digitally produced images. And along with the protagonists she has introduced into them – who activate the pictures, "continue painting them" and/or establish a dialogue with the viewer – they become a stage for change. "It's up to the people which way the road goes", Paula wrote to me recently. And in one of her works from the year 2018, which shows – seen at an angle and from above – roads entering curves, and persons on a bridge over a river, she has the following dialogue: "When I close my eyes, I just see two ways – Never close your eyes, darling".

Thus Paula Carralero Bierzynska, as an artist, sends an unmistakable signal to protest the supposed inevitability of developments that many people today face helplessly. The fact that she composes her visual worlds behind glass and then presents them as virtually digital clearly shows that she is an active and critical child of her era: She lives in interesting times – and faces up to them. And to do so she doesn't even need WLAN or electricity – at least during the presentation.

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Back at the café, the young woman I mentioned at the beginning also spoke of the "image as speculation, as hypothesis in relation to reality". No doubt some readers have already guessed that she was speaking about none other than Paula Carralero Bierzynska. You will be able to see the artist's visionary "satellite images" of the end of the world – while presumably at the same time the world continues to exist – under the title "Paradise Lost" as part of the exhibition that is accompanied by this catalogue.

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[1]The German political scientist Philip Manow works with the term “(de-)democratisation”: “Democracy versus democracy – antiliberal versus liberal, direct versus representative democracy, perhaps even »the people vs. democracy«? It seems that democracy has never been as controversial as today, while at the same time what follows from democracy has never been as controversial. Everyone steps up in its name and accuses the adversary of being an adversary of democracy.” (Quoted from the advertising text for Manow’s upcoming book on the website of the Suhrkamp publishing company: [https://www.suhrkamp.de/buecher/ent-\\_demo-krtisierung\\_der\\_demokratie-philip\\_manow\\_12753.html](https://www.suhrkamp.de/buecher/ent-_demo-krtisierung_der_demokratie-philip_manow_12753.html))

[2]Title of an opinion-based online conversation on the website of the New York Times, 25.2.2010, [https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/25/opinion/bernie-sanders-mike-bloomberg.html?algo=top\\_conversion&fallback=false&imp\\_id=61926483&imp\\_id=708108216&action=click&module=Most%20Popular&pgtype=Homepage](https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/25/opinion/bernie-sanders-mike-bloomberg.html?algo=top_conversion&fallback=false&imp_id=61926483&imp_id=708108216&action=click&module=Most%20Popular&pgtype=Homepage)

[3]Simone Bretz: Hinterglasmalerei ... die Farben leuchten so klar und rein, Munich 2013. P. 9

[4]Ibid., p 13

[5]An LCD, or liquid crystal display, is a display whose function is based on the fact that liquid crystals influence the polarisation direction of light when a certain amount of electrical voltage is applied.

[6]In 2011/2012 Paula Carralero Bierzynska was herself part of the Spanish “Movimiento 15-M” (the 15th of May Movement), which was organised primarily via social networks, and which protested against shortcomings in social and economic policies.