



Free Your Soul 2, 2014

Pigmentdruck auf Stoff, Stoff, Swarovski Perlen, Fell, 145 × 110 × 8 cm

Pigment print on fabric, fabric, Swarovski beads, fur, 57.08 × 43.30 × 3.15 in.



Jonny's, 2008
Schaufensteransicht
Storefront view

Art as Foodstuff

Eva Meyer-Hermann

“A wall hanging is a special type of wall decoration.”— This definition of fabric hangings is taken from an advice page in the virtual world of eBay. A wall hanging is different from ‘other decorative articles’ (such as framed pictures and various three-dimensional objects) by virtue of its material and the way it is typically displayed. There are examples in many cultures, with richly embellished, colourful items from India being a favourite source of design ideas. One advantage of a textile is that it can be used to beautify large expanses of wall. There is a wide variety of patterns and motifs—some recall geometric mandalas, while others imitate abstract, oriental patterns or recount figurative narratives featuring humans and animals. The motifs in wall hangings from late Antiquity and the early Christian era depict mythological tales and religious scenarios. The hand-crafted nature of fabric hangings in church interiors points to an affinity with ordinary people and collective production, yet their contents are intended to be educational and moral. In private homes edifying messages once abounded on nursery walls or as embroidered homilies in kitchens and ‘front rooms’.

My first sight of a wall hanging by Jonny Star was in the summer of 2015 and it certainly did not conform with my image of this genre. It was hanging in the kitchen of her apartment as part of *Sweet Love*—a group exhibition presented by Jonny Star with her own work and that of four other invited women artists. I was perplexed. I had never seen anything like that by her. I knew her compact bronze sculptures—they deal with existence and death in an almost abstract manner, while their surfaces reveal the existential struggle of the forming, artistic hand wrestling with literally tangible creation. I was curious to find out more about this artist’s work, but as yet only knew a few pieces. And now this. Hanging unceremoniously on the wall in this high-ceilinged old building was a pornographic image in a size that you would normally only ever see on a cinema screen. Down below it the kitchen cabinets were laid with a buffet for guests at the opening—Turkish flatbreads on rustic wooden boards, bowls with tzatziki and olives. Standing around the wall hanging were the evening’s guests, talking animatedly, holding glasses of wine and bottles of beer. Yet even this cool gathering exuded a sense of uncertainty in such close proximity to a male figure in a distinctly lascivious pose. The military cap worn by the semi-naked youth has slipped down over his eyes; a groan seems to be issuing from his pursed lips. His unbuttoned shirt reveals a smooth chest and he has provocatively lifted one leg over the back of a folding chair. Khaki trousers complete the look of a man in uniform. But—his flies are wide open; the model has taken hold of his penis with his right hand. The gesture is as intimate as it is exhibitionistic and recalls sadomasochist images in gay erotic magazines. As sexual stimulants, images of that kind are usually hidden under the bed, in a nightstand or in a closed locker; they are not hung on the wall as large-format reproductions on fabric. The source of the motifs on the wall hangings was a collection of gay magazines from

the past and the aesthetic of the muted colours of those old photographs is echoed in carefully selected patterned fabrics and borders. The disturbing thing about these poses is not so much their specific historical connections as their timelessness. Jonny Star's pornographic images have an anachronistic air that comes across all the more strikingly due to their being worked in traditional techniques such as sewing and embroidery.

The questions and uncertainties that immediately arose during that initial encounter were complex and came tumbling in on each other, without any really satisfying answers following in their wake. Why was that? The stagelike theatricality of the gestural aspect of the figure is in stark contrast to the ideal of classical drama that relies on the unity of time, place and action. Perhaps that is the source of the strange sense of timelessness. But even in their artistic reinterpretation as wall hangings these erotic scenarios are neither of our time nor consistent with each other. Their equivocal demeanour is programmatic. It would be too simple to suggest that the intention behind them was merely to perturb bourgeois patterns of seeing. What would be the challenge, given that there have been just such onslaughts on the pictorial world of the establishment since the 1960s at the latest? Neither do images of this kind any longer have to be seen as part of a 'feminist campaign' against pornography or even as declarations of homosexual identity. And yet—such boldly presented, explicit images by definition turn the viewer's thoughts to the sex and sexuality of their (female) maker, whose male pseudonym clearly adds fuel to the flames. Is it really possible that a woman would work with images 'like that'? Has she chosen to do so because she is pursuing a particular political agenda? Presumably we are so conditioned by society that we have to ask these questions. One possible response would be—but does that even matter today? That game of question and answer remains up in the air and thus also constantly challenges our own assumptions. Jonny Star draws out presumptions in order to show that they can be both correct and false.

The image that first catches our eye—that astoundingly direct, pornographic image—in fact turns out on closer examination to be a surprisingly romantic scenario. Like the shift (filled with gold coins) worn by the Star-Talers girl in the fairytale, the pin-up wall hangings are in fact covered with little Swarovski stones sewn onto them by hand. Like a profane glass-bead game they slide around the member that entices and excites. A burst of glittering red stones has been sewn around the penis and the testicles, suggesting the moment of ejaculation as semen shoots upwards towards the naked upper body. At the same time, in the night-blue background there is a stardust scattering of gleaming stones on either side of the figure's bowed head. Is this a novice engaged in a cosmic exchange with the ether? Other hardcore motifs in the wall hangings are similarly adorned and enhanced with tiny, sparkling stones. One imagines the artist—needle

and thread in hand—patiently sewing the glass stones, one after the other, onto the tough canvas ground of the reproductions, how she constantly had to pierce layers of canvas so that afterwards the lightest sprays of light ennoble the base motifs and set them glittering and gleaming. The feminine 'bling' of the racily turned-up rim of a cowboy hat becomes a halo, while elsewhere the little jewels run down the tender body of a Maghrebian youth recalling glinting trickles of water. Like the delicate showers of glass stones, the extravagant textiles and borders framing the fabric prints also 'comment' on the motifs. The organic pattern of the fabric—recalling plant fibres—which seems to enclose the centre of the image with its tentacles, is dynamized by the intricate cord motif on the appliquéd decorative edge. The furry pom-poms along the lower edge of the wall hanging provide the finishing touch for this raunchy celebration of supposedly old-fashioned, decorative images. The allusion of the symmetrically suspended pom-poms to the corporeal subject matter is neither flat nor ironic; if anything it calls to mind carnival costumes and cheerleaders at sporting events. The artist herself is interested in the intimacy that is on display here (and at the viewer's disposal), which she redignifies and rehumanises with subtle references to human rituals and through the 'caresses' of her craft-based fabrication. As in medieval votive images, where the main focus is on a saint or the body of Christ, Jonny Star's pin-ups are designed to induce a moment of contemplation. As such this technique needs an element of alienation and a certain nostalgia to become an effective springboard. And that is why the source materials for these wall hangings could not be found in the present-day porn industry—it seems that a certain maturity and detachment from the material is needed for the work to make really close contact with the humanness of the human body.

Mind and body are no more opposites than sacred and profane. Yet the aim here is not any hackneyed notion of the oneness of art and life, with aspects of daily life mingling with creative and philosophical ideas. Jonny Star's art is physical, spatial and corporeal. Her works are entirely present in the space—they occupy it, make one aware of it, define it and open it all at once. She is not out to develop a style that criticizes or comments on this or that—her work is about her love of being alive, of life, which does not distinguish between 'high' and 'low', 'we' and 'you', or 'us' and 'them'. And even if the sheer heterogeneity of her works might appear to suggest that they are somehow contradictory, they are in fact all pursuing the same aim—of being objects within a community of human beings and having an impact in their own individual contexts. Perhaps that is also the reason why some of the group exhibitions Jonny Star invites guests to ultimately look more like solo exhibitions of her own work. Or, to put it the other way round: it would be easy to conceive a solo exhibition by Jonny Star that looked like a group exhibition. The bronzes, displayed on plinths in the classic style, dominate the space alongside pouffes sewn with bright patchwork covers that guests

can lounge on as they gaze up at the wall hangings. Jonny Star lives and breathes art. No, not as a Gesamtkunstwerk, but as a model for daily life that she has developed for herself and that she is now committed to.

Some years ago Jonny Star ran a small Portuguese shop in Berlin—an actual, real shop. Yet, even then, it was already strangely at odds with its own time. That period of her life—like many others and like much of her artistic work—was not what it might have seemed at first sight. Yes, it was a shop, where customers could buy foodstuffs, haberdashery and typical Portuguese craft items, but it was a ‘curated’ selection—which is not to say that the aim was to present the notion ‘shop’ as a work of art (critiquing the consumer society) or to present a Happening of sorts that would spur members of the public on to their own creative acts. Once again our ‘educated’ guesses and suppositions are unsettled. The fact is that Jonny Star’s enterprise was very different to those of earlier precedents such as Claes Oldenburg’s *The Store* and Allan Kaprow’s *Activities*. And it may be that the comparisons called to mind by her use of relatively traditional mediums such as bronze—comparisons with existential sculpture by modern artists from Germaine Richier to Henry Moore—are no more than formal similarities. Her textiles may recall works by North American artists such as Sister Corita Kent and Mike Kelley, which toy with or expose predetermined pictorial interpretations. But here, too any comparisons—also with Christine Hill’s *Volksboutique* (since 1996)—only have a limited application. Jonny Star is not trying to collect and order the world (Hill) or to analyse sign systems in our culture in order to poetically deconstruct them (Kelley). Her artistic concept is to turn everything into art—things, situations and actions alike—in the same way that sculptors use their hands to form a work of art from some kind of ‘material’. The term ‘sculptor’ seems perfectly appropriate here in connection with Jonny Star’s cast objects. However, it seems a little more far-fetched with regard to the collages and wall hangings. The affinity of the fabric wall hangings to ‘female’ craft skills and (motivically) to politically correct ‘gender art’ and its focus on identity is hard to reconcile with the expressivity and intuition of the bronzes. But both constitute the same artistic, quasi-sculptural, ‘plastic’ praxis. Jonny Star is a builder—only in her case she creates something entirely new from the items she accumulates.

Jonny Star lives and works in the small commercial premises in Kreuzberg that used to be her Portuguese shop and which has since become a venue for the numerous exhibitions and performances she puts on. She shows her own work there, but also work by other artists in her circle of friends and beyond. As before when she was running her very individualistic shop, she always takes a risk with her exhibitions, in the sense that she ventures out into the public realm without knowing in advance what the response might be. And if the people involved in her projects (both the artists and the public) are

in fact seen as ‘material’, then events of this kind could perhaps rightly be described as social sculpture. For friends and strangers alike they provide a chance to talk about art and its meaning and necessity in life. In a way this is the antithesis of visiting an anonymous art gallery or silently wandering around a museum. In the most natural way, the invited guests are presented with a very human chance to participate: Bring food and drink with you! As a result this studio/apartment becomes a place of exchange, where the artist gives a great deal of herself—where everyone gets something back. It’s the same place where an open trapdoor once invited visitors to explore the (temporarily installed) hideaway of an artist-couple from Jonny Star’s circle of friends, the same place where one weekend the bathroom floor was covered with a sweet mosaic of brown and white sugar cubes, and the place where refined, porcelain figures quietly commented on their own genre as figurines and on their whole species. This place is and has long been something special. As a food shop it was never a wily strategic import-export experiment; it was a place that instigated the strangest encounters between food, art and people. The stock included salt from salt mines, sardines, eels with cloves, flour, breakfast cereals for children—but also kitchen towels, aprons and woven willow baskets. There were even the obligatory glazed Portuguese tiles. To procure certain items the artist travelled to remote parts of Portugal, since the wooden matchboxes were just as unusual rarities as the chewing gum packaged in little boxes. Jonny Star knew her way around in Portugal having lived there for some time, and news of her expertise soon spread amongst Portuguese expats in Berlin. But no doubt her customers were also a little taken aback, because in the midst of the displays with beautifully nostalgic-looking packaging—between Piri-piri and eucalyptus plants—there were bronze figurines, interacting in a lively, physical manner. And maybe that moment of astonishment at the unexpected encounter with works of art may have prompted some visitors to select something from the cool cabinet filled with wine, cheese and chorizo and not just to ask Jonny to explain but also to order a cup of coffee, which would be served at one of the narrow tables in the back shop—no doubt not without customers being alerted to the fact that they could do something just as creative themselves if they purchased one of the imported embroidery kits displayed on the wall, in the form of a sealed plastic bag containing an image of the finished piece, embroidery canvas and suitable embroidery threads. Art, here, was a foodstuff like any other. Perhaps a little exotic—Portugal is not just round the corner—but always full on and totally accessible.