



ARTIST  
MARKUS SCHINWALD

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## SILVIA BOMBARDINI

talks to MARKUS SCHINWALD

**Silvia:** Few fine, illusive details on anonymous antique brushwork: your art has the gentle and inquisitive quality of a riddle, intimacy and wit. Could you tell me something about your creative process, where do you find your canvases, and what makes them appealing to your eyes? Do you recall how it all started?

**Markus:** I actually started to work on 19th century black and white drawings and changed to paintings a bit later. It was an attempt to give the works another life. According to Benjamin, a work of art has a life on its own and eventually dies like a person. What I do has some kind of bypass function and turns them into 'art zombies'. The work itself starts by hunting for paintings - I search for works at many different auction houses and antique stores. Then there are restored, which is the biggest challenge - it takes up to a hundred hours to fix a Biedermeier painting, for instance. The very last process is to add a little detail to the painting as if it were done a hundred years ago, a bit like photoshop of the 19th century. I have to adapt to the individual style and brush stroke so that it really blends in. That's a very osmotic moment.

**S:** Fragile and supple, the human body appears in your work as a cultural construct, shaped by ways of fashion, dressing, gestures and disguises. It could seem somehow unfit to host the infinite depths of the human mind; a dangerous ground, and way too soft, to build our identities upon. Are your minute, sharp prosthesis in silver and rubber meant to supply for its limited nature?

**M:** Oh yes, most prostheses are meant to compensate for a human deficit, not just as an apparatus to even out differences between people, like wearing glasses to see as well as others, but a deficit that we invent and define ourselves. I call them prostheses for undefined cases.

**S:** Despite their tight, surely invasive character, they don't in fact look so unwelcome on your subjects' features. They seem instead to almost help them to uphold their grace, their composure, that suddenly reveals its carefully contrived core. How much of the rules of society do you believe we come to internalize? Are the prosthesis perhaps a wilful, if unconscious choice?

**M:** The nature of 19th century portraits is that the people depicted have rather mild expressions on their faces. They are neither particularly happy, angry or sad. Even by adding an apparently "mean" prosthesis doesn't really change that expression. They seem fine with it. It should have the effect that they seem to have chosen that thing for a specific purpose, one that we don't ne-

cessarily have to understand.

**S:** If their bodies are cultural constructs, their psyches too seem heavily influenced by the order and conventions of the outside world. And the thin braces along their mouths or noses, the masks and muzzles can't be but the top of the iceberg of the many devices of discipline, restraint and self-correction that they've learnt to master. But their real use, their true purpose apart from a vaguely restrictive function, still remains unclear: why is that? And what would happen without them?

**M:** I kind of dislike the idea that everything that appears to be fun and a pleasure is just the result of a social construct. I hope it is rather a deeply individual tool that helps us to cope with the world; a thing that works just for us and is not universal in any sense.

**S:** Unlike your characters however, and unlike many artists, your focus in your work doesn't seem particularly self-centred, but interested and directed towards the whole of humanity, almost as a condition. Yet in your titles, you call your subjects by their first name. Is there any intimate connection, if not an identification, between you and your portraits?

**M:** It is not really an identification with the portraits - though I'm building the prostheses sometimes and trying them on to see how they feels - but something that takes away more distance than a last name does - bit like parents calling their kid Silvia and not Miss Bombardini. In the 19th century people were called by their forename but added a honorific - like Mr Markus. It's kind of nice to have the closeness of a forename with the dignity of a title.

**S:** Already in your Contortionists series in 2003, the palpable nature of an emotion was given unexpected physical presence, and you've later gracefully translated this Freudian notion across many different, interlacing media. What about this idea interests you the most, and how do you believe it relates to our society at large?

**M:** Well, my basic interest is probably in the difficulties one has with inhabiting a body. That's a problem everybody has. Because it is truly individual but also universal it is a social problem as well...

**S:** Your show Old Wants, Young Desires in Milan last summer, has cast a teasing, elusively sexual light on some of your work, much more caste and subtle, still, than dynamics of control and self-inflicted restrain

could come to suggest. There were chair legs occupied in suggestive dances, and features tightly wrapped in curtains of silk. Could you tell me something about that show, and what part does libido play in your art?

**M:** The table leg sculptures are, in a way, just a logic consequence of the notion these legs have in themselves. In the 18th century, English carpenters tried to mimic real legs when they made table legs. It was so successful that in some Victorian homes, the top parts had to be covered with fabric to prevent sexual arousal. So the erotic component is in the leg already, I just take the next step. The other element in the exhibition was a series of huge books with drawings of folds and holes. There I tried to pervert the fold that every book has. So yes, the libido played a huge part in the show - it was an abstract porn project.

**S:** In a few months, we'll get to see your work for 40th anniversary program of the CAPC museum of contemporary art in Bordeaux, curated by Alexis Vaillant. Rumours have it you're working on a huge mechanical theatre for the museum's nave, what can you reveal in advance about this new big project?

**M:** A mechanical theatre was just an initial idea, and even though it still could be seen like that, one would probably be disappointed with these expectations.. I tried to interlink different bodies of work that I have done in the last two years and some of them are animated. The biggest challenge for the show was to find an arrangement with the space. It is a bit of a nightmare for an artist - huge, high, complex and historical. If you fight the space with similar methods you will lose. I like the idea of a tiny cat peeing into a decadent apartment. No matter how big the space is, the cat smell is always stronger. I'm not saying that I want to do cat pee but I had to find a method or element that competes with the space in an asymmetrical way. Shine against history, fragility against monumentality.





