

# FUNNY GIRL: MATTHIAS DORNFELD'S HYSTERICAL PAINTINGS

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unicity in these clichéd painterly motifs, but not so much in his physical visual rendering, rather as a painterly mentality in itself. In Dornfeld's work one recognises the 'painter's hand' not in the first place in the physically painted object, but in the mind of the painter. In Dornfeld's case, such classic painterly motifs as portrait, still-life and landscape are deployed purely mentally, as cliché images in themselves, which never consciously refer to the motifs to which they *appear* to refer. He uses these classic motifs purely as the clichés that they are, as if they were disposable postcards of a banal sunset, a kitsch flower vase or a pin-up babe. Their importance to Dornfeld is as emotional nourishment for his mentality as a painter and in the first place are an ideal excuse for being able above all to continue painting as freely, chaotically and emotionally as possible. The final result thus rarely transcends the cliché, and is entirely subordinate to the mentality with which Dornfeld painted it. In this way he skilfully undermines another cliché: that of the unique brilliance of the painting. To him, his paintings do not appear to be any more than decorations deformed by a child's hand, which could, so to speak, end up both on a nail in a museum and between a magnet and a fridge.

Thus, in a nuanced way, but one in which he truly puts himself into perspective, Dornfeld balances between the imposed 'historical' structure that painting brings with it (the yoke of the classic painterly motifs and historical references) and the intense emotionality of the utterly ('childlike') painterly freedom.

On the other hand, because of his constant juggling with bright colours and highly gesturally applied brushstrokes, Dornfeld's paintings equally appear immediately interpretable

as purely expressionistic. But nothing could be further from the truth. His images are expressive, not expressionist. The vividly coloured, thickly painted, childlike visual idiom that Dornfeld uses is here explicitly *not* used as a painterly reflection on any expressionist sub-movement such as Art Brut or, by extension, Naïve Painting, but only, once again, as an emotional excuse to be able mentally and physically to paint as freely as possible. So there is no possibility of an 'analytical' rationalising view of Dornfeld's work, only an emotional-historical one. The viewer immediately 'feels', as it were, the various 'logical' historical references and in this way is almost spontaneously and emotionally compelled to look.

Dornfeld's constant tacking between different historical painterly motifs and -isms in a burlesque, easily readable painting style makes it seem to the viewer as if he is referring to these motifs and -isms, whereas in fact this is precisely not the case. On the contrary, for both the viewer and himself Matthias Dornfeld creates a painterly smoke-screen, a series of 'style clouds' as it were. In the case of the viewer it is because, just as he thinks he feels able to play with these various historical stylistic referents as he looks, he is made to face the fact that he is looking at nothing more than an exact, childishly deformed cliché of them. Conversely, Dornfeld uses his style clouds for exactly the opposite: as a structuring artistic and painterly, historically justifiable excuse to... be able to paint as freely and playfully as possible. Whereby he actually seems to be saying: 'I'm sorry, chaps, but unfortunately it's nothing more than a stupid vase... But I have painted it with total freedom.'

And all the rest is just painting.

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The German painter Matthias Dornfeld creates paintings that hinge on the hysterical. He repeatedly paints familiar subjects: landscapes, portraits, and still lifes. "The subjects and motives are simple," he explains. "They come without thinking. They're stupid, banal, commonplace, clichés." It is through the repetitive use of the familiar, even boring—both in process and in subject matter—that Dornfeld subverts these painterly tropes and, in turn, makes them strange, makes them funny. Take for instance an untitled work from 2006 that features a crudely drawn figure, a face consisting of just two green dots for eyes and a half smile of a mouth to match, applied directly with a squeeze of the paint tube. The figure looks out at the viewer in a kind of wry manner as if she gets it; she's in on the joke.

Matthias Dornfeld's purposely non-academic works pose a series of questions that examine the often subtle nuances of humor: Can a painting act like a slapstick comedy? Can a gestural mark also be a pratfall? Or present a sequence of set-ups? Might a painting suggest that we can all be in on the "joke"? The joke that, in the case of Matthias Dornfeld, might just very well be the serious act of painting?

Dornfeld is reluctant to say that his paintings are indeed "slapstick" but concedes that they are "funny, some are stupid. Often I think that many of the paintings are even ugly." The paintings exude less a funny haha and more an ironic wink. He hopes that the works are "rebellious," and I would argue that the humor found not just in Dornfeld's work but also in the contemporary painting of Amy Sillman

and Dana Schutz allows for a type of liberation, a confounding of societal norms that betrays the sincerity of the painting tradition.

Writing on Surrealism and the theater, Antonin Artaud recognized in the famous American slapstick routine of the Marx Brothers the freedom to defy the essential components of reality. He argued that when a woman dramatically swoons on a sofa, falling head over heels, or when a man thwacks the beat of the music on his dancing partner's behind, "these events comprise a kind of exercise of intellectual freedom in which the unconscious of each of the characters, repressed by conventions and habits, avenges itself and us at the same time."

Humor encourages a defiance of convention, often tapping into our unconscious wants and needs. In Dornfeld's 2014 exhibition, ironically titled "Painting Sweet Painting," works of varying sizes are hung salon style, each depicting a different portrait of high-intensity color and line. All of the paintings display a distinct personality: one figure has two swaths of purple paint for hair; above her the head of a green-haired man floats in a sea of red; and below her, just to the left, is the profile of another man with a splotch of red and a splotch of green on either cheek. Taken as a whole, the cast of characters might be seen as a series of tragedy masks or a school for clowning, playing the conventional for laughs.

Half funny, half tragic, these paintings could immediately be understood through the history of German Expressionism, especially considering Dornfeld's use of

acidic colors, his layers of paint built up only to be scraped by the palette knife or by the incision of a mark made by the butt of his paintbrush. In his “playing at expressionism, like a child might play doctor,” as Dornfeld describes it, he references the style of the Expressionists while circumventing the neurosis or seriousness of their content.

Certainly anxiety persists in Dornfeld’s work, but it is made ironic through his referencing of past artistic movements. Artaud again on the Marx Brothers: “We have to admit that the humour also includes a certain amount of anxiety—even tragedy—and fatality (neither happy nor unhappy but very awkward to formulate), which runs through it like the revelation of a terrible affliction across the profile of absolute beauty.” Through humor, Dornfeld’s paintings elude the anxiety of influence and the Expressionist’s existential angst, reaching instead toward a meditation, a “playing at” the darkly beautiful and the ridiculous.

It seems clear, then, that Dornfeld understands that tragedy and humor are close cousins—that sobbing, at times, accompanies hysterical laughter.

More importantly, Dornfeld’s work makes apparent that these dualities of emotion are not in fact dualities at all—that tragedy and comedy, when presented together as part of an intractable emotional and aesthetic whole, reveal to us the complexity of the very core of our shared humanity. Dornfeld’s work is thus relatable to a spectrum of viewers.

And indeed, how could it not be? The hysterical nature of slapstick’s exaggerated movements relies on the confidence and agility of its performers as well as on a kind of knowing agreement between performer and audience. Dornfeld invites the viewer to be in on the joke, and through this invitation reveals a multitude of readings on what we might think of as “funny” or “sad” or even just “boring.” His assured broad brushstrokes, casting spontaneous swaths of humming yellow or frenzied curlicues of brown hair, create on the canvas an intentional awkwardness that defies the conventions of painting. The humor that surprises us in Matthias Dornfeld’s paintings is playful and at times even biting, but in its direct simplicity always inclusive, too. Even welcoming.