



“I wanted to hold a mirror up to society”

Interview with the artist László Fehér

Gudrun Szczepanek (GS): You began studying at the Fine Art Academy in Budapest at the beginning of the 70s. Can you tell me anything about the artistic movements and the situation at the Academy at this time?

László Fehér (LF): I started studying in 1971. The curriculum involved the usual assignments and requirements so that we had to paint still lifes, landscapes or nudes but avoid anything political. I can give you a simple, everyday example of what the atmosphere was like at the Academy. My aunt's husband had given me an old jacket, a Hungarian railway uniform jacket. I removed the stripes and went blithely to the Academy in it every day. At some point I realized that people were avoiding me. One day a woman student came up to me and asked if I was a follower of Mao, because that was the uniform they wore. Then I thought it was best not to wear the jacket any more. You can see from this that I wasn't very political at the time.

This was also because people who expressed an opposing opinion or were having serious thoughts about the world would suddenly be dismissed – also from the Academy. It was sufficient to be suspected of having an opposing attitude, as in the case of Péter

Forgács [film director and media artist], to be given your marching orders.

To go back to my studies: I first studied with Lajos Szentiványi, who sadly died much too early. Then I became a master pupil of Ignác Kokas. By the third session he was already urging us to show more self-confidence. His standpoint was that as an artist you can express anything you want to. He was a major inspiration for me. In my fourth year of study I began to go my own way as an artist, with an unusual mixture of hyperrealism and social criticism. I also began to use photography. The use of a photo instead of a model had a significant influence on my painting. I consistently developed this concept, for example I painted pictures based on photos from a shipyard magazine. In this magazine the best workers of the month were officially presented. My series from these photos was produced in 1975 and is called “Részlet a Brigádnaplóból” [“Excerpts from the workforce journal”].

I repeatedly used the worker portraits from the magazine as models and in this way created a photorealistic work which had a sociographical aspect as well. Then I painted series such as the trams and the underpasses. This series also included a picture

that eventually caused a “scandal”: “Törött aluljáró” [“Defective underpass”] or “Aluljáró I”. [“Underpass I”] from 1975.

This work was inspired by the underground station Vörösmarty utca [Vörösmarty Street], of which I took a lot of photos. I wanted to turn one of the photos from this series into a painting, but it wouldn't come out as I wanted. I then got very angry, threw the photo on the floor and stamped on it until I had destroyed it and the surface was completely ripped. Suddenly the photo was exactly like dreary everyday life under socialism. This destroyed photo seemed to correspond much more to my everyday life, my tormented world, so that I painted a large format (2.5 x 2 m) picture of it. This painting caused a scandal with the Academy committee and soon after that I was called up for military service.

GS: I've often thought looking at your paintings that you must also have had a fundamental grounding in naturalistic painting. I know that the students at the Kiev Art Academy, for example, had to spend a lot of time on nature studies. What was it like in Budapest?

LF: It was different here. My class – with Szentiványi and Kokas – was more relaxed and we didn't follow the very strict Russian study model like they did in Kiev. But there certainly were classes, such as Aurél Bernáth's, where the students painted in a curious realistic style. Professor Szentiványi taught a more relaxed view of the world. My critical realism developed, as I've already said, in the fourth and fifth year of my course. Aside from this, the social realism that had dominated the 50s was no longer acceptable in the 60s and thus no longer so present in our lives. The expectations and requirements of painting in the 70s were along the lines of “a little realism”, “a little figuration” and “a little abstraction”. However, art in those days could in no way be political, and if it was, it absolutely had to reflect the opinion of the party.

You can imagine what my hard, critical realism

unleashed in this environment. People were afraid of being confronted by pictures, of having to deal with them because they unveiled and exposed everything. Because I portrayed simple people with almost painful realism, the observers were directly confronted with the miserable reality. Hard realism was the only way I could communicate something. This was a basically ascetic artistic position, because I had to dispense with the “virtues” of painting. I wanted to hold a mirror up to society. A mirror that showed the dreariness and colourlessness of everyday life.

GS: Is that why you also distorted your pictures, to break up the realism and introduce new content?

LF: That was the only thing I could do. Distortion or abstraction in a picture reinforces the effect of realism. I wanted to hold a mirror up to society to show how dreary life is, to show the reality of socialism with all its difficulties.

GS: Your painting changed a lot in the 80s. A bold gestural element then comes in, which reminds me of the so-called “Jungen Wilden” (Young Wild Ones) from Berlin. Did the expressive characteristic have something to do with the fact that you wanted to widen the horizons of photorealism at this time?

LF: No, it was connected with a trip to Switzerland I made with the artists' association “Fiatl Képzőművészek Stúdiója” [“Studio of young artists”]. This journey had a fantastic effect on me. We then went on to the documenta in Kassel. We were confronted with art and other artists that were totally unlike anything we'd known before. This made me ask myself whether I should be reflecting a political attitude with my art at all. Is communicating political content the whole purpose of art? For this reason I also changed my style, because I'm of the opinion that art should do more than this.

The bold phase lasted five years, it was a good, care-free time after the hyperrealism. With my work “Diaspora” (1982) I went back to topics that had in-

terested me for a long time such as Judaism or scenes from everyday life. I often paint the same themes again and again, but am always looking for new ways of approaching them and new angles and in this way create new situations. I also want to keep giving the observer other points of reference and means of approach. Painting constantly has to change. In my opinion, it's the artist's responsibility to extend, to broaden the concept of art. When an artist adds nothing new, doesn't broaden the concept of art and adds no new aspects with which to create a dialogue, then it's just a meaningless gesture and art becomes insignificant.

GS: After the expressive gestural style, your painting changed again. It then became very tranquil and reserved, and although it's still realistic in part, it's above all surreal. It expresses more what's behind the façade, as well as states of mind, when I think of the people who sit in vast empty landscapes with their backs to us, looking into the distance. These scenes also contain a lot of social criticism, which is only apparent at second glance.

LF: I would like to go back again to the last question, the question of the influence of Western art. You have to imagine that Hungary, and of course the Academy, was completely cut off from the West by the iron curtain, it was a self-contained world. We didn't know the art there. It's repeatedly said that there are connections with or an influence from the West. Of course there was photorealism in the West, but we weren't familiar with it, these were two parallel and independent trends! People very often talk about a connection with Gerhard Richter. It should be remembered that the roots or sources of our painting are actually the same: critical observation of society. It was not until the trip to Kassel that we were confronted with art in the West. And by the time I discovered these artists, my photorealistic phase was already over.

Photorealism developed independently in the East and West, even if it had a common source, a back-

round of social criticism.

GS: At the beginning your figures, even if they were only painted in grey tones, were still very largely naturalistic. Then all of a sudden they changed and became outlines, through which the actual background, mostly elements of landscape, appears. Did anything in particular trigger this?

LF: There's a story behind this: After my wife had a miscarriage I was in my studio and painted a picture which shows three women standing round a baby. The picture was painted very realistically, but the next day I didn't like it at all. Suddenly I realized that it was wrong and I took a cloth and wiped away the interior of the figures, so that only their outline remained. Then I incorporated the background into the figures. This was something totally new for me and made me aware that figures in pictures are symbolic. The symbolic nature of the human form became the starting point for my new figures on canvas. In the West, and in Germany too, these figures are often compared with similar forms of expression in Western art, for example in Francis Picabia's work. But my painting has nothing to do with this. Instead it was a Hungarian artist, Lajos Vajda, who was important for me, and was already a formative influence in my childhood. He also painted outline heads, for example. – I'll show you what I mean. One day a foreign art historian came to see me who immediately put his own interpretation on my motifs and established a connection with Picabia. When I then showed him a book with works by Lajos Vajda, he was very surprised that there were very similar forms of expression in Hungarian art. – This is a general problem, cultural arrogance on the part of the West. For there are repeated attempts to evaluate and understand Hungarian artists from a Western point of view, against the background of Western art history. But this won't work, because we have our own roots. Many people can't accept that even behind the iron curtain there were artists who created independent work and were able to think freely.

Here's another example: In 1989, a year before I exhibited at the Biennale in Venice, I developed my sculptures, outline figures that have as if they were stepped out of the picture and are now standing freely in the room. A year after the Biennale, similar sculptures appeared by an artist in the USA, which prompted gallerists and collectors to ask me if I had copied these figures. I just replied that they should look at the dates and they would see that my sculptures were created two years earlier. I always have the impression that the West considers us second-rate.

GS: I think it's very good that you've brought this up. After all, the iron curtain divided the art world for decades and has distorted the way each side sees the other's art and culture. That's why the exchange that's now taking place again and the fact that you, László, and other artists can also exhibit on a really international basis is a great opportunity. And there are now art fairs, like the "Art Market" here, the aim of which is to bring contemporary art from East and West together. I feel we are at a point where a lot is changing. – And I would also like to emphasize that for me the outline figures are the characteristic features of your painting. I also find it extremely exciting how you continue to develop this motif, when, for example, the body seems empty, but the clothing has been worked in greater detail and made to look almost realistic.

LF: This is because of the topics of the pictures, you could read a lot into this. When I now draw simple, white, exposed figures in outline, it means something different from when these outline figures wear clothing painted in greater detail. For this I use characteristic articles of clothing. The figure is subordinate to the content of the picture, it serves the content.

GS: It has also struck me that you often portray children in your pictures. Children are the most sensitive and vulnerable beings in our society. Is that one of the reasons why you repeatedly go back to them?

LF: When I started painting children, I asked myself

very critically how it would be understood, whether people would see it as kitsch, or how it would be received. You're right, children are totally vulnerable and at the mercy of our society. Children interest me because they are still pure and unspoiled. They have the potential to be either good or evil. Children are simply themselves, they are absolutely perfect and totally at one with themselves. For me children also embody the good potential of mankind.

When I started on this theme, I didn't know a single artist who had tackled it. Of course, there were occasional child portraits, but they were painted for a completely different reason than my ambiguous portraits.

GS: That reminds me of the picture I saw today in your studio in TÁC, the child with the red water wings, swimming in oily black water. It reminded me of the oil spill and I had the impression the child was about to go under. But it has such a blissfully tranquil expression and is not aware of this.

LF: Yes, you can see it's a happy child, serene and in its innocence completely oblivious to the danger. And you have the feeling that it's going to sink any minute, that something bad is going to happen.

GS: I have the impression that with your pictures of people you want to portray conditions in our society. The portraits that you paint in very different styles also go in this direction.

LF: The figures are simply there and communicate precisely the conditions, the moment in which they were created. They don't go back into the past, nor do they establish any connection with the future, they only exist in the present, in the moment when they were created. For me these are permanently valid conditions, which will still be valid in five hundred years' time. – For this reason I also have successors whom my pictures have influenced and who work in exactly the same way.

GS: I would like to go back to the portraits: I think

what you've just referred to are the little outline figures, but what I meant were the "close-up" portraits of people such as the homeless, or the portraits from extreme perspectives, where you look down from above on a person. These move me greatly and I'd be interested to know what your inspiration for them was.

LF: My models for these portraits are always people from my immediate surroundings, they could be relatives or acquaintances, but anyway people I have contact with. And I also have contact with the homeless, I meet them daily on the street and talk to them. That's why they've also become part of my work, because they are part of my life and our society.

GS: In the same way I also find your self-portraits very exciting. As far as I know, it was quite a while before you painted your first self-portraits. Was there a reason for this?

LF: I was already painting self-portraits in my youth, when I was still trying to justify myself and find my place in society. However, I did paint the first important self-portrait rather late on at the age of almost fifty: the "Önarckép Fülessapkában" ["Self-portrait with a fur cap"] is from 2001, and it's also in the "Magyar Remekművek" ["Hungarian masterpieces"] book that was published by the Hungarian National Gallery. This picture of course has historical connections and makes you think. I projected the historical context onto myself. Everyone senses this and so the reactions to this picture were quite extreme at the time.

GS: I'm not quite sure I understand the historical context. The fur cap with earflaps does however remind me of the Russian military, is that right? – You used this motif in several self-portraits, also in the tondo I saw today in TÁC.

LF: Yes of course, the ushanka was worn by all the soldiers in the Warsaw Pact. And in the picture you just mentioned I face the observer and confront him with everything this funny cap stands for. – The

self-portrait, the tondo "Önarckép ellenfényben" ["self-portrait against the light"] from 2011 with the dark face can be interpreted in the same way. I painted it for a thematic exhibition in the Jewish Museum here in Budapest. However, it couldn't be shown there because it was in a large solo exhibition in the Musée d'Art Moderne in St. Etienne at the time.

GS: There's also a new, very strong self-portrait of you here at the Art Market – at the stand of the Ralf Dellert gallery from Munich. You are sitting facing the observer as a dark form against a light background, and behind you there's a figure holding its hands over your ears.

LF: The picture was painted after an experience in Berlin. We were walking through Berlin on a fine afternoon when you could feel the city breathe. I was fascinated by the whole milieu, by the movement of the people on the streets. I was thoroughly enjoying the city and soaking up the atmosphere and all the stimuli. At the same time I couldn't help thinking of Hungary and the conflict-laden situation there. I wanted to push away this thought. I wanted to immortalize the moment in Berlin and sat on a stone and imagined someone coming up and putting their hands over my ears and keeping everything else away from me. This behaviour is a kind of protective mechanism. – The new pictures here were all painted after my stay in Berlin and I'm interested to see how the German public will react when the works are now shown in Germany.

GS: I'd like to go back again to the portraits from extreme perspectives. It's an artistic feat to work with this pronounced foreshortening. However, these pictures trigger strong emotions in me, because as the observer I'm placed in an extreme observing position, for example looking right down on someone.

LF: This is also related to what I've already talked about, being at the mercy of something. You look down from above like a god on the other person, and he looks like a tiny, weak being. Here of course

the question is whether the artist is the creator, or whether the work is a creation of the creator, in other words God. – For me as an artist it's very important to extend the concept of art and continue to make it possible to approach works of art from new angles and in new ways.

László Fehér talks to the art historian Dr. Gudrun Szczepanek from Munich in an interview recorded at the "Art Market" in Budapest on 30 November 2013. We would like to thank the art historian Fanni Tihanyi for the translation from Hungarian to German and German to Hungarian.