

Hitler Vitrines

at Schroeder Romero Gallery

reviewed by Suzanne Wise

Welcome to the world of Hitler, located at Schroeder Romero Gallery (formerly Arena@Feed, 173 N 3rd St, 486-8992). The world of Hitler according to Marsha Pels, that is, as portrayed in her show "The Hitler Vitrines," on view until December 23, 2001.

Upon entering the gallery, viewers first encounter Hitler the artist. Well, to be more precise, a blown-up photograph by Andreas von Lintel of artist Marsha Pels sporting a full-on Hitler outfit, complete with uniform, tall leather boots, military cap and signature mustache. The title of the photograph, "I Love Germany and Germany Loves Me," echoes "I Love America and America Loves Me," a performance by postwar German uber-artist Joseph Beuys in which he spent several weeks in a New York gallery prowling around with a real live coyote. Pels, a descendent of German Jews, spent a year living in her ancestors' town (Emden, Germany) while on a Fulbright fellowship and continues to visit a psychic German landscape in her work.

Like Beuys' borrowing of a symbol of the American Wild West and its accompanying bravado, Pels dresses up as the ultimate symbol of Germany's dark, destructive history. Yet Pels' Hitler uniform is ill-fitting; it is obvious Pels is a woman dressed up in a big man's clothes. And her mustache looks distinctly Charlie Chaplinesque. She's adorned in someone else's mythology, and showing it off for the cartoony facade it is. She's mocking the trappings of power, not adopting them.

Pels act of portraying the artist as a uniformed patriarchal figure also references Beuys, whose image—blown up black and white photographs of the artist—usually loom over museum presentations of his well-documented ritualistic performances. Beuys, who fought for Germany during World War II, suffered a major breakdown, and then reinvented his artist's life with the help of an Everyman's uniform, featuring a fishing vest, brimmed hat and boots (and for some performance/actions, a felt suit).

Vitrines are also signature Beuys. He used glass display cases, like ones in old-fashioned natural history museums, to present mementos of war that signified violence and injury (hunks of yellow fat, red-cross kits). Like Beuys, Pels preserves artifacts that are referential to the war. But unlike Beuys, the objects Pels presents are not actually found objects but artist-made representations of things. Clichés and snippets of myth—both sinister and absurd—of the Hitler legacy.

A vitrine containing an opaque black crystal gun is stacked on top of a vitrine containing black crystal boots (slightly cracked and mottled by the mold making them look both realistically weather-beaten and macabre fairy tale-ish at once). A vitrine containing a smoky-white crystal gas mask with a long and elegantly dangling air tube is stacked on a top of a vitrine containing a set of beautiful transparent blown-glass lungs (well, actually, not lungs, but twin branches of arteries that would hook up to lungs if lungs were there). A crystal skull missing part of its jaw and wearing a helmetlike "skull cap" of ripply brain matter.

This and more online at www.wburg.com.

Other vitrined objects appear at first glance to be less directly referential to the holocaust or Nazi Germany. A scarlet-pink crystal heart, a curved crystal spinal column, a crystal penis with one crystal testicle resting on a silver pillow. Each a private or hidden (interior) part of the body suggesting that Pels travels beneath the clothing and surfaces of history to investigate the interior of history's body. The spinal column, placed next to the resting penis, creates a dialogue between the two shapes—one cylindrical shape is designed to be erect and prepared to hold a body up (if there was a body there to hold up) but curls instead in a tentative position. The other shape, the symbol of male power, sleeps on a princess bed, missing part of its equipment. The penis piece also portrays the ridiculousness of certain Hitler theories: It was speculated that Hitler's anti-Semitism stemmed from the fact that he had only one testicle. Pels mocks a theory that believes in the phallus—when it's whole—as the ultimate sign and resource of power.

The use of crystal and glass as materials also has an element of historical specificity, referencing *Kristallnacht*, "The Night of Broken Glass," which was a night at the beginning of the persecution of German Jews when Jewish homes and businesses were destroyed. The preciousness and fragility of the materials recalls a world of refinement and beauty that is lost forever. A preshattered concept of a shapely and meaningful world of readable forms that we know awaits shattering.

The transparent glass and translucent crystal give each object an ethereal otherworldly quality. This is heightened by the fact that the sculptures sit on clear glass platforms and below the platforms are mirrors, which make the objects appear sunken into some deep unreachable space above us. We look down at the black boots and below it and see the boot bottoms standing seemingly on top of us. The crystal heart is particularly transformed by this optical illusion. Looking down on the top of it, we see a scarlet tight-fisted muscle. But looking down into the reflection below, we see something much more abstract and disturbing—a horrible lump of flesh, a bloody grenade, or a fiery planet.

Two pieces step out of the glass/crystal sculpture-vitrine format. One is a glass tank of dingy yellowy water, dimly lit, and filled with a half dozen or so eels. The eels were piled up around the air bubbler when I saw them: puffing their cheeks out, sprawling lethargically on top of each other, one butting its nose against the translucent end of its tail. Mass graves, slow death, and some kind of psychic torpor, fear and confusion are just some of the metaphorical meanings that come to mind.

The other outside-the-vitrine piece is a heavy and cumbersome suitcase-like box (a riff on similar art box/kits Beuys and members of the Fluxus movement created) containing domestic (one could say feminized) travel accessories, such as hand towels imprinted with seven different images of Hitler. One of the seven is a reproduction of the Hitler we all know from history books and films: the mustache, the severe scowl, the uniform. The others are representations of what Hitler would have looked like as an older man had he survived the war—bald or paunchy or bespectacled. The images Pels uses were originally created by a sketch artist in response to theories that Hitler had actually not been killed in the war but was living in hiding in Argentina or elsewhere. The black box also contains a red heart and a yellowish, one-testicled penis—both made out of soap. Here the heart and the penis (symbols of passion) are domesticated, made benign. The soap pieces also seem to be presenting the notion of

a clean conscience as a joke. Just try to scrub your conscience clean once you know the horrors of the holocaust.

"The Hitler Vitrines" is a show not to be missed—not only for a glimpse into the world of Marsha Pels (whose work is in the collection of the Museum of Modern Art and elsewhere, and who is currently involved in a well-funded site-specific public artwork in Emden, German) but also because of the show's pertinence to this time of war and its accompanying verbal and visual propaganda. Pels' regally beautiful, perfect objects end up playing a taunting role in our desire to fix atrocity into a distant time and place by clamping it down with artifacts or symbols. By smashing up (with glass and mirrors) the over-used signifiers we use as shields against true remembering, Pels invites us into her more personal, fragile and open-ended museum. And what's displayed are not only luminous nightmares but also a darkly humorous critique of the fictions of history we live (and make art) by.

Suzanne Wise (suzwise@earthlink.net) is the author of the poetry collection The Kingdom of the Subjunctive (Alice James Books, 2000). Her writing also appears in the anthology American Poetry: The Next Generation (Carnegie Mellon, 2000).