

“Though there be a better illusion of happiness than childhood?”

“This naked garden was showing understanding for the restlessness that I had brought with me.”

Wiesław Myśliwski, Nagi Sad (The Naked Garden; not published in English.)

In her work “Paradijs I – IV”, Ellen Korth once more creates a kind of book art that transcends categories like landscape photography, biography and poetry. Similar to her previous photography books, here, Ellen Korth does not create a documentary or a simple image. The “paradises” are subtle and mysterious. They are delicate artisan “book sculptures”. Looking at children in gardens, parks and the Frisian landscape for Ellen Korth became a trigger for her own childhood memories. All of the seven volumes – of each volume there are five copies available – open with a rear view of a child in the present time. Rear views of seven boys and girls with no name in black and white. These figures of boys and girls are childlike Adam and Eve before their expulsion from paradise. Because innocent people live in paradise in which innocence is ignorance (*Søren Kierkegaard*). In a state of innocence, man is in imminent harmony with his naturalness, with peace and calmness. According to Kierkegaard, however, it is a kind of peace that entails a great “nothingness”. Out of this “nothingness”, there comes fear. Due to its uncertainty, this fear also becomes apparent in the pictures of the children standing in front of a floral wall without a horizon. Every volume ends with a literary miniature of a haiku written by Ellen Korth. Not as a consequence, but as a mirror of her own helplessness every volume concludes with a black-and-white photo of Ellen Korth as a little girl that accompanies the poem. Head on, and, most notably, “cute” and carefree - in a way her life would never turn out to be. Caspar David Friedrich’s repoussoir figure of the monk who is looking onto the open and illustrious sea – that is into eternity – in the work of Ellen Korth becomes the rear view of a nameless and universal child which is looking at an impenetrable jungle of flora. Each time it is an invitation for the viewer to contemplate.

A child in the garden – we as children in the garden - appears to be an archetypal human memory. The eternal garden of our childhood is a place of dreams in which we go on a journey in our imagination. Scattered pictures of memories that are antitopographic and made blurry by our memory. A garden is like handwriting, like a code, like a sign of the gardener. The garden is sending messages from the time of its emergence and becomes a chronometer for its and our growth and decay. To the garden, time is inherent like it is to a photograph.

Influenced by Japanese culture of animated nature, Ellen Korth assumes that everything in nature has a soul and is looking at nature as if looking through a kaleidoscope. When Schopenhauer talks about “the will in nature,” he substitutes the term for “will” with “stimulus”. Plant life is dependent on external stimuli. It neither has consciousness nor knowledge. Ellen Korth, however, imagines a synthesis of sensitivity – a synthesis of both inspired humankind and a flora that has a soul. Without human perception there would also be no landscape. A landscape would be mere nature. William Eggleston’s “Democratic Forest” in the work of Ellen Korth becomes a “subjective garden”, in which not everything is equally worth being depicted.

Just like her books “Jorinde” and “Utilité”, “Paradijs I-VII” is a waiting game about showing, hiding and discovering. Ellen Korth deliberately works with the materiality of the surface. She raises her photographs above a mimetic approach and assigns a sculptural intrinsic value to each of the individually designed photography books. The exploration of the book – for it is more than just turning pages – for the viewer becomes a sensitive action. The feel of the delicate Japanese kozo paper, the transparent photographs and the seemingly random signs of destruction often have an impressionistic presentation.

Bright, abstract colour spots remind the viewer of Monet’s water lilies in the garden of Giverny. Just like the plants, leaves and blossoms in a garden want to be felt, the book’s

pages want to be grasped as well, because in a garden, the visual impression is only a part of all the experience possible: "They who come rarely to the woods take some little piece of the forest into their hands to play with by the way." (*Henry David Thoreau, Walden*)

In cultural history a garden is a metaphor for paradise – for a peaceful Eden, for an arcadia where lamb and lion slumber next to each other, but also for a shelter created by humans. Ellen Korth is in search of her own „Hortus Conclusus“, of her own piece of land, of her home. Her search runs through her artistic work in a historic, geographic and genealogic way und will never be complete.

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