Axel Christoph Gampp
Head veiled
on drawings by Corinne Güdemann 2008

In his celebrated 1435 treatise on painting, Leon Battista Alberti discusses a work by the Greek painter Timanthes of Cythnus, the *Sacrifice of Iphigenia*. Alberti writes: “[In the painting] he depicted Calchas in sorrow, and Odysseus mourning yet more intensely; on his depiction of Menelaus, finally, a man wracked by feeling, he brought his entire art and talent to bear. Now, at this point he had exhausted the emotional register, and he despaired of adequately depicting the girl’s father, who was surely quite overcome by grief. Thus he veiled Agamemnon’s head with his garment, and left it up to the viewer’s imagination to eke out a father’s sorrow – which was quite beyond what they would be capable of perceiving with their eyes alone.” Alberti knew the picture only from ancient reports, in one of which, by Pliny, the description also includes a judgement of the painting’s quality. Pliny writes: “One always believes one can make out more than this remarkable man has in fact painted in any of his works; and although his art is of the very highest calibre, yet his genius is greater still.”

For his part, Lessing concurred entirely with both the ancient sources and Alberti. In his seminal work *Laocoon: An Essay upon the Limits of Painting and Poetry*, Lessing detected in precisely this painting by Timanthes, known solely from ecphrasis, an example of the way painting restricts itself to the use of veiling, its own proper instrument, so as to avoid exaggerated displays of affect.

Agamemnon with his head veiled has had a substantial historical impact on culture. Its influence is undeniable when one examines the various veiled figures in a recent series by Corinne Güdemann (*Sitzende* or “Seated figures” I-IV; *Stehende* or “Standing figures I-II”), in which the aforementioned effect is immediately obvious. Here too, as in the painting described by Pliny, the veiled head constitutes the void in the painting that affords its viewer room for imagination, a place – as Alberti describes it – for creative fantasy beyond visual perception. On the other hand, there can be no doubt as to the kind of affect postulated beneath the veil, since no one could possibly imagine that Güdemann’s subjects are concealing the fact that they have broken out into uncontrollable laughter. Rather, among the figures is a woman (*Sitzende* III), based loosely on Caravaggio’s *Penitent Mary Magdalene*, who sets the general tone of mourning and melancholy. None of the subjects is neutral, all are in fact figures of pathos who lend distinct expression to their inner state of mind. They are rendered anonymous by means of a different process than that used to preserve the identity of people in photographs, by placing a black bar over their eyes. It may not be wrong to speak in such cases of *activated anonymization*. Through anonymity, the subject actually draws more attention to itself, just as Agamemnon’s stature is increased in the *Sacrifice of Iphigenia* despite his being rendered anonymous.

According to Pliny, the technique of veiling is itself a sign of great genius. Indeed, the ability to offer viewers voids in which to exercise their imagination is routinely commended by visual theorists. Pliny, however, distinguishes between this skill and the actual art of painting, and the same distinction can also be made for Güdemann’s drawings: to wit, between their form and their content. As a narrative element, veiling serves the abovementioned process of activated anonymization, and thus includes us, its viewers, in
the action depicted in the painting. Formally, however, veiling has a different effect. Essential for the artist is that her subject’s gaze is in each case no longer apparent: Güdemann’s figures do not behold us, their beholder; and thus – on the formal level – her figures themselves mutate into a composition with pronouncedly abstract features. There is indeed a formal affinity between *Sitzende I* and Güdemann’s *Haufen* (“Heap”), since in both cases the ornament she constructs out of textiles takes on a life of its own beyond that of the object portrayed. Güdemann’s manner of representing textiles thus becomes an artistic crux of signal importance. Finely drawn in coloured pencil, the texture of the material is as it were interwoven with its colour. Each stroke becomes a thread, and these individual threads are then combined to produce the painted textile. This technique of ‘weaving in paint’ is particularly evident in two pieces, *Vorhang blau* (“Curtain: blue”) and *Vorhang rot* (“Curtain: red”), in which the process of lending independent life to the material depicted, as described above, is exemplary. Whereas the curtain in the blue variation has not been pulled completely to, thus allowing us to be instantly spellbound by our glimpse of the seated figure, the red curtain resolves everything into its ornamental surface, and thus sublimes it. To a certain extent, *Juxtapose* also demonstrates the same problem. The picture is an astonishingly accomplished meditation on the relationship between form and content. The subject in the foreground, gazing into the middle distance with what is ultimately narrative intent, instantly enthralls the viewer, who senses that a story is about to be told. And yet, since the face of the woman in the red-chalk drawing is only sketched in, as against the capacious ornament of her cloak, which is quite dominant, the story has barely begun before ceding to questions about the picture’s composition. The dancer in the background, meanwhile, is also involved in this interplay of arrangement and narration, composition and plot. And the same could also be shown in the case of the drawing entitled *Wärmen* (“Heating”).

Other of Güdemann’s group portraits also exist in the tension between ornamental composition and activated anonymization, in particular *Bürde tragen* (“Carrying a burden”) or *Unter Decken* (“Beneath blankets”). The artist is here clearly interested in finding a middle way between a vigorous appeal to the viewer and the resolution of compositional problems, by evoking the aesthetics of reception.

One group seems initially to stand aloof from these concerns. These are remarkable compositions of clothing, often underclothing, hung disturbingly on trees or from high-voltage lines, thus creating an inscrutable confusion of nature and technology. It would not be revealing too much to note that these pictures are based (at a certain remove) on the artist’s visual impressions of places in China, where the sheer residential density drives many apartment-dwellers to hang their wash out to dry on neighbouring trees.

Looked at together with the above-mentioned series of drawings, this group naturally arouses the desire to seek out the connection between them – at first an apparently impossible task, given the difference in subject: on the one hand there are the veiled figures, tending to abstract ornament; and on the other there is the precise depiction of the outside world, clearly outlined and captured in pale shades.

And yet, in these works as well, something like activated anonymization is going on. Each piece of clothing can be seen as a pars pro toto, and as such begins to act on behalf of the subject it clads. *Äste* (“Branches”) presents a virtual ballet on the part of the garments’ absent owners. And in *Drähte* (“Wires”), meanwhile, the clothes seem to communicate with each other the way only humans do.

In a sense, here too, Güdemann gives the possibilities and limits of painting (or rather, drawing) their due,
just as Lessing demands. In the place of a loquaciously slavish devotion to the plot, her non-demonstrative representation, her way with absence, amounts to an appropriate depiction of human action. Were she actually to convey a particular content – worse still, one with a social conscience – her work would ring of special pleading. Words are better at expressing this kind of message. Visual representation, on the other hand, must also pay sufficient respect to formal aspects, and display a certain openness in its formulations, which in this case is supported by Güdemann’s restrained palette: everything has been toned down to a pale, pastel-like nuance, and thus seems almost reserved, secretive. The washed-out clothing shows off its owner like a ghost. Her figures occasionally recall sentimental clichés, placeholders just barely suggesting an attitude. And thus, here as well, the process of activated anonymization takes place, and provides a bridge to the above-mentioned groups. Herein, too, lies the connection to the texts cited at the outset. Güdemann’s is a felicitous combination of veiling and unveiling, revealing and concealing, and is furthermore packaged in a form that supplies such equilibrium. Perhaps this is in fact the vehicle – as Pliny believed of Timanthes – of true mastery.

Translation Rafaël Newman