



ARTIST

Angelika Rinnhofer

TITLE

Menschenkunde VII

DATE

2005

DIMENSIONS

40 in H x 30 in W

MEDIUM

Chromogenic Color Prints

CATALOGUE NUMBER

2005.061

CURRENT LOCATION

NA 05

ANGELIKA RINNHOFER

BORN

1962

BIRTHPLACE

Nuremberg, Germany

GENDER

Female

CITIZENSHIP

Germany, United States

CULTURAL HERITAGE

German

LIGHT WORK RELATIONSHIP

Artist-in-Residence, 2005

Main Gallery, 2007

Fine Print Program, 2008

LIGHT WORK PUBLICATIONS

Contact Sheet 137

Contact Sheet 144

BIOGRAPHY

Angelika Rinnhofer works primarily in photography, video, dance and performance but sometimes incorporates non-traditional art media such as baking, gaming, and trace making. In her work she reflects on the feeling of belonging and the effect of memory on her sense of affinity. In 1995, Rinnhofer immigrated to the US from Germany, where she had gone to art school and trained as a commercial photographer. Since then, migration and its consequences of uprooting, re-settling, and remembering have been paramount considerations in her art practice. Rinnhofer's most recent project "a priori" is a collection of narratives of individuals, whose curiosity and attempts to make sense of memories, stories, and facts eventually led to the disclosure of their Jewish ancestry. Her projects "Menschenkunde", "Felsenfest", and "Seelensucht" refer to her analysis of traditions, archives, and chronicles, all essential in forming a culture's identity and a person's subjectivity. Currently, Rinnhofer is working on a series documenting the effects of opioid addiction.

circa 2018

ESSAYS

Like ghosts from our past who are displaced in time, Angelika Rinnhofer's images are inherently elusive. They act like black ice on a winter road—deceptively clear, yet you need to go slowly in order to connect—otherwise you risk sliding across their slippery surface. Rinnhofer's sitters appear so familiar, as though we've seen images of them countless times before. Yet the person we are gazing upon only existed for the moment of the photograph. The moments and exchanges Rinnhofer frames never truly occurred as we see them depicted. They may suggest someone or something, they may suggest an event, but they never were. In the end they (purposely) generate more questions than offer answers. Born in Nuremberg, Germany, Rinnhofer grew up surrounded by the confluence of faith, art, and history. She was deeply influenced by artists such as Albrecht Dürer, who lived and worked in Nuremberg in the late fifteenth century, and Caravaggio, whose controversial paintings of Christian icons brought forth realism to holy figures as Jesus and Mary Magdalene (for example, by humanizing them with dirty feet and tattered robes). Years later as an adult, Rinnhofer found herself amazed by the uniquely Christian and near obsessive depiction of martyrs and saints at the moment of their suffering, and their ongoing attachment to the implements of their suffering. Taking a cue from Caravaggio's practice, she utilizes hints of modernity and brings them into contact with centuries-old iconic imagery within her portraits. Reminiscent of the aesthetic of Renaissance and religious tableaux, her images hinge to a past in which they do not belong. A portrait at its essence is a plane of transference. It depicts something or someone at a moment unavoidably past, and preserves it for any who choose to engage it. The viewer, who brings to the encounter their own background and perspective, reads the portrait, accepting its various signifiers of meaning as well as invisible histories or ties that perhaps bind them to the subject portrayed. They are simultaneously a fictional creation and a matter of fact. But what Rinnhofer asks us to do is side-step this prescribed relationship with portraiture in order to consider the implied histories and meanings they offer, in part the who and why. In order to do so, she has created a series of visual collisions in her work that untether her otherwise tightly composed scenes. This is not to say that she takes issue with the aesthetics of the Renaissance. Her photographs reveal a sincere fascination and love for that period and prove her a remarkable disciple. Yet she is not interested in merely emulating the mannerisms of her heroes, rather Rinnhofer appropriates their style in order to bring forward a dialogue surrounding the complexities inherent to representation. She invites the viewer to invest themselves near completely in the past while maintaining a foothold in the present. As Rinnhofer writes in her artist statement, "science, like religion, has had its share of martyrs and saints."¹ Each has claimed its victims and had its heroes as they worked to establish themselves as definers to all of life's questions, and both have vigorously maintained their inarguable absolutes. Like fraternal twins fighting to deny the other's existence, their differences and commonalities are visibly reflected within the arts. In Rinnhofer's series *Felsenfest* the worlds of scientific inquiry and faith collide upon each other. The elation of each saint depicted in her work is disrupted by the inquiring nature of a doctor or scientist. Yet the absolute devotion of the saint remains contrary and devoid of recognition to the questions poised before (and of) them. In using the pictorial space of her images as grounds for debate, Rinnhofer rejects any absolute confirmation of either party. She reminds us of the necessity for dialogue around the images our culture creates and consumes. Rinnhofer's work seduces us with the promise of insight and knowledge. They elicit our faith for what a portrait (and photography) can offer. But just as she brings us to that brink of divine faith, logic betrays her anachronistic references and encourages us to take another and clearer look at what is now a shattered surface. (c) 2006 Ariel Shanberg 1. Angelika Rinnhofer, artist statement, 2005. Angelika Rinnhofer lives in Beacon, NY, and participated in Light Work's Artist-in-Residence program in May 2005. Her Web site can be found at <http://angelikarinnhofer.com/> and <http://www.amrphotographie.com/>. Ariel Shanberg is the executive director of The Center for Photography at Woodstock, located in Woodstock, NY. CONTACT SHEET 144: German artist Angelika Rinnhofer grew up surrounded by the visual opulence of Catholic churches in Bavaria. She spent church services in fearful awe, absorbing the images of tortured saints and martyrs that lined the walls. It was an unforgettable experience that she now draws upon as an artist. Trained as a photographer in Germany, Rinnhofer started posing people in bygone costumes, in postures, lighting, and composition inspired by the Old Masters. Her photographs fit comfortably within the company of European paintings of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Not tied to the visual language of just one painter or one period in time, the photographs nevertheless are heavily inspired especially by Albrecht Dürer and Michelangelo, by Mannerism and the Renaissance. Rinnhofer's use of chiaroscuro lighting of heavy shadows, as utilized by Caravaggio, has become her signature style. Rinnhofer developed her photographic style while working on the portrait series 'Menschenkunde'. Although her connection to the general aesthetics of the Old Masters is apparent, Rinnhofer introduces a contemporary mindset that makes the work uniquely her own. Her 'Menschenkunde' photographs are not portraits in a classical sense. They reveal little about the personality or status of the sitter. There is no narrative. Even the backgrounds have been voided out by total darkness. Instead the images create a psychological space, and within it

suggest as much about the photographer as they do about the models. Many Old Master paintings defined how important or rich people were going to be remembered. The way they were painted suggested their rank in society. Even today when viewing portraits during visits to the museum, it is common that as much time is spent reading the image labels to find out who is depicted as it is spent looking at paintings to find out how the figures are depicted. In contrast, Rinnhofer's photographs in the 'Menschenkunde' series feature figures she has invented. She does not provide identifying information, and in fact no story suggesting significance or rank exists. In the presence of the strong characters in the images and the void of information, the photographs raise a desire in viewers to create their own stories. Whereas the singular portraits in the 'Menschenkunde' series were created in response to Rinnhofer's familiarity with Renaissance portraiture, the group images in her series 'Felsenfest' reconnect her to the religious content of the church paintings she saw as a child. This intense project encompasses beautiful images with a morbid subtext as it examines the lives and tortured deaths of Catholic martyrs. In the style of allegorical church paintings, the martyrs are not depicted in the gore of their torturous moments, but in stylized recreations of those events. Curious about the ongoing battle between science and religion, Rinnhofer adds modern-looking scientists to the mix of martyrs and torturers. The role of the scientist alternates between that of the silent observer, active participant or torturer, or that of gentle caregiver. Rinnhofer explains that having been raised very religious, as a child she felt the constant threat of hell and damnation. Science, she explains, was a rational counterpoint. All images in 'Felsenfest' feature multiple figures. Most photographs allude to the source of suffering the martyrs had to endure. Images with three or more figures often include a neutral bystander observing the events attentively, suggesting the way intellectuals studied the world, including the secular realm, during the Renaissance. With her third series, 'Seelensucht', Rinnhofer returns to the sole figure. If the 'Felsenfest' series captures the final act of the human drama, then the 'Seelensucht' series sums up the epilogue. The martyrs seem resurrected, physically and emotionally healed, and hint at their stories in subtle clues. Many figures in Rinnhofer's three series seem suspended in their own thoughts, yet especially in the 'Seelensucht' series, the figures often make direct eye contact with the viewer, as if wanting to be remembered through the retelling of their stories. They have forgiven their torturers and have made peace with their harsh fate. The formality and emotional distance from the 'Menschenkunde' series has gently shifted to encompass the experience of a person who has suffered deeply. The images in the 'Felsenfest' and 'Seelensucht' series are based on actual martyr stories. Yet Rinnhofer does not distinguish between the likeliness of their authenticity. It does not matter if these stories are truthful, embellished, or were invented to make a point long ago. Rather than give historical context to each of the images, Rinnhofer strips the photographs from their stories altogether and withholds the identity of her martyrs. Yet, some of the historical figures may be more recognizable than others, and their visual clues may give way to a simple Google search. Saint Cecilia, patron saint of musicians, bears her telltale instrument. Saint Catherine is featured with the spiked wheel, later known as a Catherine wheel, that is said to have broken at her touch. Presented in anonymity, without the names or stories of the martyrs, the images resist becoming narratives about the lives of only certain historical figures and become open to interpretation. Rinnhofer never tries to hide the artificiality in her storytelling or the liberties she has taken as an artist. On closer look, the figures seem far too tanned, bear contemporary makeup, occasionally reveal a wristwatch, or show pressure marks from socks that were stripped off just moments before the photo session. Modern props such as a current newspaper or even a laptop find their way into the work. There is no deception, only added complexity. Rinnhofer does not let her images settle comfortably in the past. She is not merely retelling religious myths. At a time when even a superpower nation allows itself the right to handle the Geneva Convention as a guideline rather than ratified policy, the fate of martyrs and heroes at the hands of torturers has been redrawn. Rinnhofer never leaves the realm of Catholic martyrs, yet in the context of current events facing one's torturers takes on new meaning. The power to define who is labelled martyr or heretic, freedom fighter or terrorist, has been used equally in modern and historic times to justify violations of basic rules of humanity, yet it is a lesson we need to learn anew. Rinnhofer's images beckon the question where the viewer sees him- or herself within these series. Some may identify with the role of the beautiful nobility in the 'Menschenkunde' series, to appear elegant and regal. Others may choose the role of an honorable martyr from 'Felsenfest', to face one's torturers and accept death over the corruption of one's convictions. And yet others will choose the bold single figures of the 'Seelensucht' series, having found peace in one's choices at the cost of one's life. Not many would choose the role of the torturer, as few might admit that they would be willing to pick up tools of torture and turn on another human being in an effort to break their spirit, to save their souls, or to force from them truth as defined by the torturer. Few would choose the role of the bystander, seemingly innocent while passively looking onto a heinous act of violence. Rinnhofer's images of martyrs tell the stories of people who stood up for their religion, and against all odds did not recant their beliefs. Cast deep in the past, these stories still bear significance for us today. Throughout human history, torture has been applied for political and religious reasons. Even told with theatrical lightness, Rinnhofer's photographs of people tortured supposedly for the protection of the greater good should give us pause and lie heavily on our collective consciousness. Hannah Frieser © 2008