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# SIGNS TAKEN AS SIGNS

BRIAN CURTIN ON COLLIER SCHORR



*Sheepskin*, 2006. Below: *The rivalry between God and other Gods*, 2002. Opposite: *Arrangement #2 (Blumen)*, 2005. All images courtesy: 303 Gallery, New York



**COLLIER** Schorr graduated in New York the same year Hal Foster published his essay 'Signs Taken for Wonders' in *Art in America*, 1986. This is a telling coincidence insofar as Schorr seems to have created her oeuvre from a central claim of Foster's text: appropriation strategies in the visual arts risk reproducing what the art aims to critique or, at the very least, challenge. She has done so not by following Foster's ultimate contention – that visual art should resist complicity – but by repeatedly engaging this so-called risk.

'Was it worth breaching this particular taboo for what seemed like a private fantasy?' Leslie Camhi wrote in a review this year of Schorr's photographs of German adolescents posing in uniforms that bear Third Reich insignia, which remains illegal in Germany. Was it worth breaching a taboo indeed? Schorr's most recent book of photographs *Neighbours/Nachbarn* (Steidl/MACK, 2006) depicts a number of Nazi fantasies of the Aryan ideal; blonde, square-jawed male youths in uniform or posing topless with a pronounced and ultimately aggressive sense of self-assurance. Part of her wider project to examine the truth of the appearances of gender and nationalism, Schorr has photographed rituals of masculinity represented by wrestling as well as militarism, iconic images of the German landscape and, in the book project *Jens F.* (2005), codes of femininity.

For *Jens F.*, as the story goes, Schorr met a young white man on a train in Germany who reminded her of the model in Andrew Wyeth's *Helga* paintings. For over six years she photographed Jens, and sometimes others, in poses and circumstances that reflected Wyeth's paintings and pasted the results into a monograph of the older artist's series. The resulting collages and accompanying notes are an almost academic study of visual language and the codes which belie Helga's and Jens' ethnicity and gender. In an email exchange Schorr wrote '...[this] project is a high point because it engages most of my interests, writing, criticism, portraiture, landscape, costume, screenplay writing, and internationality'. Considered as an object, *Jens F.* physically disrupts, through the juxtapositions and rough pasting, the iconographies that compel Schorr's attention and therefore the book literally challenges the ways in which we read or consume those iconographies. While not quite a frustrated comment on the challenge of historically entrenched codes, *Jens F.* is nevertheless more notable in terms of an ostensible failure than success. The book reveals little beyond the fact of Schorr's pursuit of her objects as an anatomy of appropriation, reflecting on the 'German-ness' of Jens and Helga, Wyeth's subjectivity and Helga's place within the conventions of art history.

*Jens F.* can be more productively understood as symptomatic of Schorr's work as a whole, insofar as it is difficult to establish a developmental trajectory to her output generally. From the exhibition 'Excuse me while I kiss the sky' in 1999 to both 'Neighbours' and 'Jens F.', the most obvious aspect of Schorr's output is the sense of different forms of engagement with said iconographies, from the reproduction of white masculine stereotypes in, say, *Trifekta (Ice, Ice Baby)* 1999 through to the confluence of expressionism and formalism in her 2004 series of photographs of US high school wrestlers and, again, the almost academic approach of *Jens F.* In the untitled wrestlers series Schorr approaches the male bodies as so much flesh, freezing moments of physical strain in baroque lighting. As the chiaroscuro largely subsumes and de-emphasises identifying markers of the situation, and adds a quasi-religious rhetoric, the bodies can appear as semi-abstracted forms outside time and place. Codes are, of course, at work here but Schorr's concern was to try and bypass them for something more immediate, expressive and ahistorical.

Of the wrestlers series, Schorr is quoted as saying that she wanted to examine bodies as forms outside of popular cultural motifs, but the photographs merely replace one set of motifs with another. She has also said that her art is concerned with removing myths. In this respect, it is hard not to imagine that her 'best' work has yet to come. For the moment we are left, pace Foster, with the continued circulation of signs themselves.

BRIAN CURTIN IS AN ARTIST AND ART WRITER BASED IN BANGKOK