

GORAN BERTOK: HUNGER

HOW BEAUTIFUL IS UGLY?

Goran Bertok's body of work reveals a profound consistency in the depiction of the human body in certain borderline aspects of life and, above all, in its transience. While focusing on the creation of staged scenes with motifs of unconventional sexual practices, especially from the field of sadomasochism (series *Omen*, *Stigmata*, etc.) in his early period, he later turned to a more radical exploration of physicality. This soon led him to the ultimate theme—the physical death. He devoted much of his work to this topic, both through direct visual confrontation with decaying bodies (*PostMortem*, *Visitors*), as well as through the portraiture of those who experienced immediate proximity to death (*Survivors*). By presenting the body "dwelling" in the immediate vicinity of death, as if having a "love relationship" with death, he somehow logically continues along these lines in the series *Hunger*. The series is, however, not about a classic duel between Eros and Thanatos, since there is not much room for Eros while Thanatos dominates, so we can only speak of the "love of death" as the ultimate essence of everything in the material realm.

The contemporary consumer society fosters through media omnipresence the imperative of health, youth, power, and beauty, and thereby further marginalises ageing, illness, and death. With the advent of social networks, we became obsessed with our self-image and self-representation, and consciously transform our lives into a parallel world, shaped by our ideas and desires. The symptom of the prevailing cultural and mental state is therefore an obsessive (self-)representation of youth, power, and beauty on social media. To present ourselves, modern technologies offer us the possibility of endless experimentation, transformation, and manipulation of our own image. Modern culture thus reproduces narcissistic, self-centred individuals, who worship the cult of health and a beautiful body. However, the homo sapiens does not stop here; in the pursuit of happiness, youthful appearance, and health, it now seeks to acquire the ultimate holy grail, that is, immortality, eternal life.

As individuals and as a society, we thereby strive for ideals that reject the inevitability of death. In a relatively short period of humanity, life expectancy has doubled or even tripled. We have virtually eradicated hunger and "the plague" (especially bygone fatal, transmissible diseases), and the presence of death in our conceivable world and social reality is becoming marginalised. Paradoxically, the media engulfs us with images of sickness and death, but these are primarily spectacular images of suffering and death, which happen to others and only let us forget about our own eventual suffering and inevitable demise.

In contrast, Goran Bertok confronts us with those aspects of physicality—with manifestations and presentations of illness, death, ugliness, etc.—which the average contemporary user of

social networks rejects. At the same time, we are faced on a personal, intimate level, with the perishability of our own bodies, which are, after their physical death, doomed to become a dead piece of meat. This is reminiscent of the medieval images of "the triumph of death" that were intended to make it easier for people to cope with the inevitable and to feel some kind of reassurance in realising their ultimate equality in the face of Death. When confronting the works of Goran Bertok today, they may fill us with disgust and horror, but they are also telling us: "memento mori"...

Bertok deals with the transience of the human body also in his latest series of works, this time, however, from a slightly different perspective. He introduces us to a tortured and exhausted, weary body, bearing the consequences of extreme physical and psychological experience of giving up food. Again, Bertok does not question the personal, psychological, or social motives and circumstances that brought the subject of his depiction into such a state. The artist compares the experience of anorexia with other borderline experiences, be it the so-called SM practices or the survival in the extreme conditions of concentration camps, which he has dealt with in his former projects and photographic series. Thus, the purpose of the project is not to "photodocument" the phenomenon of a disorder or disease, but rather to question the very nature of our physicality, our relationship to the emaciated body and the pain that we presuppose or feel when looking at the proximity of death.

In recent decades, we have been able to monitor the increasing trend of eating disorders, and simultaneously the trend of a changing beauty ideal. In the social construction of a "beautiful body", the imperatives of slenderness, "healthy" diet, "sporty" appearance, etc. began to prevail. The post-war beauty icons from the entertainment industry with lascivious curves have been replaced by ever-thinner models, who have even dominated the fashion world for a while. It seems, however, that this trend, which has been to a large extent a Western culture phenomenon, has reached some kind of a symbolic "turning point"—and this has happened precisely through photography. In 2007, the notorious Benetton photographer Oliviero Toscani shoot for the *Nolita* fashion campaign the completely emaciated model Isabelle Caro, who died a year later as a consequence of weight loss. In the light of this case, eating disorders have suddenly become a frequent topic of public debate, exposing, for example, the correlations between the beauty and health criteria imposed by the media and the epidemic of eating disorders among young people. Anorexia has in a way become a metaphor for the ambivalence of the modern world, where at the same time there is abundance and scarcity, as well as a metaphor for a world in which the ugly can suddenly become beautiful and vice versa.

Many depictions of tortured and suffering bodies are known in the history of art, notably in the Christian iconography of Christ and of male and female saints. The Neoplatonic conception of the world in early Christianity as the embodiment of primordial Beauty was represented by the idealised image of paradise, the good shepherd, and the saints. (By the

way, today [classic and social] media creates a similarly ideal picture of the modern consumer society.) However, with the theological emphasis on the Saviour's human nature, images of the Passion, of the suffering Jesus and the suffering saints began to come to the fore along with the ever-increasing realism of these depictions. The ambivalence of the images of paradise and earthly suffering probably culminated in northern naturalism, where the portrayal of suffering and the ugly in general, deliberately tended to expose as much contrast as possible by emphasising the physical and the corporeal. Christian imagery became on the one hand merely a pretext for depicting tortured and dead bodies, and on the other, Western Christian art began to find even in sacral motifs an excuse to depict corporeality and increasingly very erotic scenes. The connection between suffering and eroticism, or the "eroticism of pain and suffering" in Mannerism and Baroque has been described by many authors, ranging from iconography classics, such as Erwin Panofsky, to radical sexuality scholars, such as Georges Bataille. What we are more interested in here is the motif of self-suffering by way of giving up food or fasting that has been favoured in Christianity, especially among the penitents and eremites. In particular, women's saintly ideals were often associated with starvation and the reduction of all food except for the consecrated Eucharist. The most famous example is that of St. Catherine of Siena who has enjoyed only the Hosts (!) for most of her saintly life, and is mainly known in art history through depictions in which she is often represented in simultaneous agony and ecstasy.

There are many associations with Christian iconography in Goran Bertok's oeuvre; this religion, especially its rich visual history, certainly intrigues and inspires him. However, relations to Christianity can be found wherever artists thematise the question of fateful determination within one's body or the question of physicality in the sense of its finality. Thus, in his more recent project *Hunger*, contemporary eating disorders relate to the Christian phenomenon of the so-called *sancta anorexia* in a broader sense, where the motives for fasting or conscious starvation are often associated with a mixture of spiritual (religion, esotericism, etc.) and materialistic (health, sports, etc.) beliefs. Christianity enters the world of Bertok's images by metaphor—one might say that the image of the emaciated body is the image of the Passion in the company of complacent narcissists, which halts our ambivalent feelings and thoughts before the one ultimate realisation. *Hunger* is thus another "memento" of Bertok. Whatever meaning we seek for ourselves, whether it be "holy" (in terms of religiousness) or exalted in our subjective universe (say, the maintenance of the bodily ideal), the ultimate essence of all matter is death.

Dejan Sluga

Slovene to English translation: Ksenija Vidic