A Shirt travels its lonley way through hell

Jürg Laederach

Jim Whiting is thirty-seven years old and as bald as Yul Brynner. I first meet him in Klaus Littmann's four hundred square metre premises. There is he, bent over the foggy monitor-screen of an old computer. The keys crackle under his fingers. Nothing becomes ripe for a museum faster than the earlier generations of this technology. A few hours later, I meet Whiting again on a hill outside the town. He is dressed, appropriately enough, in a derivative of a dinner-suite. It consists of a dark suit, under which he seems to be wearing only skin. So where has his shirt got to?

Whereas, on my first visit to the gallery, the outside wall above the entrance to Littmann's had been blank and there had been no trace of any indication as to the name of the building or the nature of the exhibition, things were different on the second occasion. Over the door (behind which, in the gloom of the barcounter, Littmann's notorious clock, unscrewed from the main station in Munich, was visible in the distance) hung a mutilated red torso, both nipples of which had been replaced by small electrical boxes, or perhaps the were coil-holders. It was not a torso, but rather, if anything, a foundry mould in the shape of a T, with the cross-beam forming the shoulders and the vertical one the back-bone. It ended at the hips, and a metal ring enclosed the figure like a belt. Below that' there was nothing. No legs. To keep the figure, which could not run anyway, from escaping, it was stuck in cage. Whiting had imprisoned his legless man. It twitched a little. Apparently, it was still capable of movement. Each movement was accompanied by a click and a splashing hiss. Then the amputee in the mesh prison above Littmann's door emitted a burst of compressed air with a snorting of valves.

Klaus Littmann, unperturbed, immaculately dressed, his shirt showing no trace of the ravages of the monsters, is a gifted visionary and one of the last authentic utopians in Basle, that city whose relationship with culture is rapidly becoming more strained (for example in the Old Stadtgärtnerei). Littmann is sponsoring Whiting, who transported his materials for manufacturing people and limbs all the way from England by articulated lorry,. off?loaded them in the Elisabethinenstrasse and immediately got down , to fathering his creations on the spot with soldering iron, welding torch and compressed air.

In one of Mary Shelley's wolfish novels, the hero runs to a Professor Waldmann in Ingolstadt, prior to inventing, high above Lake Geneva' what he called "truncated motion". Whereupon' Dr. Frankenstein's laboratory was established. He plundered the neighbouring anatomical institutions, but together a monster from components of various corpses and breathed lives in the dark Romanticism of homunculi and gruesomely beautiful rack-and-pinion monsters. The fact that they are computer controlled matters not a jot: Whiting evokes the era of a mechanical, or rather a pre-robotoid tribe of ghosts. We would be dealing with autophages, creatures that devour themselves, that get just a little bit het-up before they disappear. Whiting's mechanical instrument is made up of chopped-off pieces of "the most powerful fire-hose in existence".

These he assembles in a montage between two pieces of steel. The section of hose hangs limp: so the two steel components can be at right-angles to each other. A regulated valve opens, a tube forces compressed air into the connecting hose: now the two steel elements spring out of their right-angle and finally form, along with the taut hose, a straight line. Whiting calls the limp/taut pieces of hose "Muscles", if he is thinking in English, or "Muskla", when he is speaking the Bernese-Grisons dialect of his mother. One of the most malicious, most brilliant exhibitions for a long time, then. You enter it by way of a barred tube, in the way that the big cats in a circus mooch into their cages. Behind the grille, there are new monsters, twitching muscles, snapping shutters, roughly-forged steel T-girders. The figures have degenerated into rumps, often individual limbs, occasionally there are arranged in groups of semi-intact beings which remind one of the mechanical and of the jaggedly indented figure of the universal fellow-man.

The most agreeable aspect of all this horror is Whiting's absolute economy in his symbolism: every physiological, anthropomorphic expression of his material is shown only once; as soon as one comes to the next figure, or fragments of a figure, one is aware of a derivation: the identification awakened by the previous figure is still there; in torment, I force myself to recognize another human being even in the merest twitching limb or physical rudiment; two steps farther on, this identification process will have to make do with even less prompting. At the end of the barred tube, I find myself standing in the light of Littmann's spacious main area and the danse macabre compresses, heightens, spastically, poundingly, crookedly creeping or hanging, garishly into that cry which, for a Francis Bacon, was a life-long obsession, in which Whiting on the other hand – rejecting as he does any connection with a tradition, a classicism, a direction, etc. – perceives, at the most, the laughter of the technical (and, by the same token, extinguishing everything technical) universal spirit. "There you are, then' that's the way they all creep along, isn't it, the way all strive, everyone of them in his own place, giving a twitch of his muscles, Muskla". To the question as to what kind of a psychology – always assuming there are such things as souls – invests these figures or their stumps, he gives the answer: "It's obvious. They are striving. I show their constant endeavour, the strain, how they try."

Two threadbare dinner jackets hang lifeless on T-hooks, the welded bones visible through a hole in the sleeves. A rampant man, a creeping figure with guillotined head, suspended from a boom, tries to penetrate a woman with the stump of his neck. She is capable of slight movements of her shins. Her painting and grasping is unconnected with the sharp caressing hand of another fragmentary man who is determined to set about her upper body which is flecked with foam material. The monster's valved tubes twitch and trash about with a force of some 5 horse-power behind them. Whiting and his assistant, Thomas Scholz, have been injured by them on several occasion and have learned to respect them: the grilles in front of these lacerating serious casualties are not there just for fun. The random momentum inherent in their motion can alter the track of their movements at any moment, and a hand or a knee-cap shooting out unexpectedly could, in an instantaneous live-show, transform and observing by-stander into a Whiting figure. The core element of this exhibition is situated, once again, within the bare bars: this time it is an immense bath, in which the cast of the murderous marionette theatre dances in three – four time on the end of their umbilical cords and air supply lines.

Alone, spiteful artificial penis stands in erection on a wooden post. On its tip, a black sucker. A lone, detached lower arm (or something similar), bends at the elbow and hops aimlessly across the floor. It seems to regard itself in equal

measure as a magnet to attract the public and a horror to repel them. Smacks in the mouth can even be friendly invitations. All the same, nobody dares to go near enough for that anyway.

Surrounded by swinging drop-lights, Scholz, the assistant, sits in half-darkness at the lathe and goes on with the work of welding together this Walpurgis Night. "The more figures break down, the more often I can improve them. Another four days, and the exhibition will be twice as good". On the wall hangs Martyr Pig, in a black suit, his upper arm and the bones of his legs sticking through the cloth, he wades about with outstretched arms. A skeleton in its Sunday-best, make not one centimetre's progress. I cry out along with the tormented creature. Now I discover Whiting's shirt. It is travelling, like the third coach behind a wicker suitcase and a potted fern, along an overhead track; on a conveyor rope spanning the whole room and running through this satirical hell. The rope can slacken and dip, so that the empty solo shirt brushes over my transfixed face like some hanged Scottish castle-ghost. It smells, this piece of human remains, a faint odour of sweat, while behind the group of four head-spinning heteronomous truncated attorneys, machine oil drips from an injection pipe into a small polished sump.

Klaus Littmann's Munich station clock stands out at the front' in the café On the back of its casing, Daniel Spoerri scratched the words, "Think Big" . Littmann had this legend before his eyes all the time until now, when, with Jim Whiting, he has done his biggest thing. The exhibits are the sensation of the season: here, a career is taking off with almost frightening rapidity. Cologne and Berlin, Milan and Glasgow have booked him. Perhaps there too, as at Littmann's Jim Whiting will set up his bed amongst the monstrous inventions and sleep every night in their midst.

Mephistopheles says somewhere, "In the end we are but dependent on creatures that we have made".