

Klodin Erb
Elf Hauben
19.08.–30.09.2023

The skirt is ankle-length, full, gathered to a flat yoke that extends over the breasts, the sleeves are full. The white wings, too, are prescribed issue; they are to keep us from seeing, but also from being seen.

[...] The bath is a requirement, a luxury. Merely to lift off the heavy white wings, merely to feel my hair again, with my hands, is a luxury. My hair is long now, untrimmed. Hair must be long, but covered. Aunt Lydia said: Saint Paul said It's either that or a close shave.

[...] There remains a mirror, on the hall wall. If I turn my head, so that the white wings framing my face direct my vision towards it, I can see it as I go down the stairs, round, convex, like the eye of a fish, and myself in it like a distorted shadow, a parody of something.

[...] He begins to whistle, then he winks. I drop my face and turn so that the white wings hide my face and keep walking. He's just taken a risk, but for what?

[...] I don't see the floodlights and the pillboxes because of the wings around my face. I just know they're there.

[...] What if I were to come at night, when he's on duty alone – though he would never be allowed such solitude – and permit him beyond my white wings?

[...] What they must see is the white wings only, a scrap of face, my chin and part of my mouth, not the eyes. I know better than to look the interpreter in the face.

[...] Given our wings, our blinkers, it's hard to look up, hard to get the full view of the sky, of anything. But we can do it, a little at a time, a quick move of the head, up and down, to the side and back. We have learned to see the world in gasps.

[...] I can stare, here, look around, there are no white wings to keep me from it. My head, shorn of them, feels curiously light; as if a weight had been removed from them, or substance.

Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, 1986

Daß eine Haube mehr ist als nur ein Kleidungsstück oder Standesabzeichen, vielmehr ein Abrichtungsinstrument, das ganz bestimmte Welterfahrung erzeugt, geht klar hervor aus diesen Zitaten aus Margret Atwoods dystopischem Klassiker *The Handmaid's Tale*, der vor einigen Jahren durch die gleichnamige Serie wieder (oder erstmals) einer breiten Öffentlichkeit ins Gedächtnis gerufen wurde. Ausgehend von ihrer genauen Beobachtung der Frauenbilder und -rollen im post-revolutionären Iran Ayatollah Khomeinis und der politisch damals erstarkenden evangelikalen Bewegung in den USA entwarf Atwood eine Schreckensvision eines religiös unterfütterten patriarchalen Regimes, das Frauen als bloße Untertaninnen in hierarchische Funktionsklassen einteilt. Aufgrund von Umweltverschmutzung und radioaktiver Strahlung sind die meisten Frauen unfruchtbar geworden. Die "Mägde", leicht erkennbar durch die Haube, die sie tragen müssen, sind Frauen, die noch fruchtbar sind, und ihren Körper zwecks Fortpflanzung den kommandierenden Männern zur Verfügung stellen müssen.

Die Haube der Mägde verweist darauf, daß im Mittelalter und in der frühen Neuzeit verheiratete Frauen gehalten waren, eine Haube zu tragen, während unverheiratete Frauen ihre Haare offen tragen durften (daher der Ausdruck "loses Frauenzimmer"). Durch die Haube wird signalisiert, daß die Sexualität der Frau Besitz des Mannes ist und keinem anderen zusteht. Während sich die Gattinnen in der ersten Hälfte des 19. Jh. der Haube zu entledigen begannen, trugen Dienstbotinnen in manchen Haushalten bis ins 20. Jahrhundert eine Haube, die sie entpersönlichte und ihr Blickfeld einschränkte. Die Haube ist ein Zeichen der jahrhundertelangen Verengung der Lebenswelt der Frauen auf das Häusliche, auf eine dienende Rolle bar jeder erotischen Handlungsmacht.

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All dies schwingt in *Elf Hauben* mit, Klodin Erbs Hommage an Margret Atwood. Wir sehen elf Hauben, fast schon niederländisch delikate auf farbiges Leder gemalt, unbeschnitten, mit blonden und dunklen Kunsthaaren auf die Wand gespannt. Die Hauben werden aus unterschiedlichen Winkeln gezeigt, so daß durch ihre Verteilung im Raum ein Eindruck von Bewegung und Wechselspiel entsteht. Durch die Verschränkung von Malerei und Installation entsteht ein filmischer Effekt, ein Phänomen, das Erb schon oft in ihrer Arbeit erkundet hat.

Die Bewegtheit der Hauben suggeriert einen unter Hauben versteckten Blick, wir fühlen uns von den Hauben beobachtet, wie von Dienstbotinnen, die zwar möglichst unsichtbar bleiben sollen und gleichwohl alles wissen. Der suggerierte Blick läßt die Hauben zu Portraits von unsichtbar gemachten Frauen werden, von gespenstischer Präsenz, die aber gerade als solche eine eigenartige in sich zurückgehaltene Kraft entwickelt, die verstärkt wird durch die Farben des Leders, die Erb von einem Lederfärber bezieht, der Modefirmen beliefert. Die von Trends bestimmten Farben bringen Erotik und Eleganz ins Spiel, eine Lust an der Erscheinung, die so gar nicht zur auslöschenden Strenge der Hauben passen mag. Fast werden sie im Wechselspiel mit den Hintergrundfarben zu selbstermächtigenden modischen Accessoires wie in der Schäferinnenmode des Rokokos oder in den karikaturhaft überspitzen Zeichnungen des Haar- und Kopfbedeckungsfetischisten Heinrich Füssli. Oder wird angedeutet, daß die Herrschaft des Trends, die sich in den Farbtönen widerspiegelt, ebenso rigid formt wie eine Haube? Die unbeschnittenen Lederstücke, mit Ösen durchbohrt und mit Kunsthaaren auf die Wand gespannt, lassen an Jagd und Häutung denken, scheinlebensdiges Körperimitat und totes Tierfragment verflechten sich, lassen einen Unterton von Grausamkeit mitschwingen, der schwer faßbar, aber gleichwohl da ist. Die Bedeutung der Zeichen gerät ins Gleiten, je länger wir *Elf Hauben* betrachten, wir sind wörtlich und metaphorisch in einem Raum, der verschiedene Leserichtungen zuläßt. Es bleibt das Gefühl einer beunruhigenden Ungeklärtheit, die korrespondiert mit der immer noch nur teilweise erreichten Gleichstellung der Frauen.

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Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, 1986

The fact that a bonnet is more than just a garment or badge of status, but rather a disciplinary instrument that creates a very specific experience of the world, is evident from these quotations in Margaret Atwood's dystopian classic *The Handmaid's Tale*, which was brought back to the attention of a broad public (or for the first time) a few years ago by the television series of the same name. Based on her close observation of women's images and roles in Ayatollah Khomeini's post-revolutionary Iran and the increasingly powerful evangelical movement in the USA at the time, Atwood created a horror vision of a religiously underpinned patriarchal regime that assigns women hierarchical functions, and reduces them to mere subjects. The "maids", easily recognisable by the bonnet they have to wear, are women who are still fertile and must place their bodies at the disposal of the commanding men for the purpose of procreation.

The maids' bonnet remind us that in the Middle Ages and early modern times married women were required to wear a bonnet, while unmarried women were allowed to wear their hair loose (hence the expression "loose woman"). The bonnet signals that the woman's sexuality is the property of the man and belongs to no one else. While wives began to get rid of the bonnet in the first half of the 19th century, servants in some households wore a bonnet until the 20th century, depersonalising them and restricting their field of vision. The bonnet is a sign of the centuries-long narrowing of women's lives to the domestic, to a servant role devoid of any erotic agency.

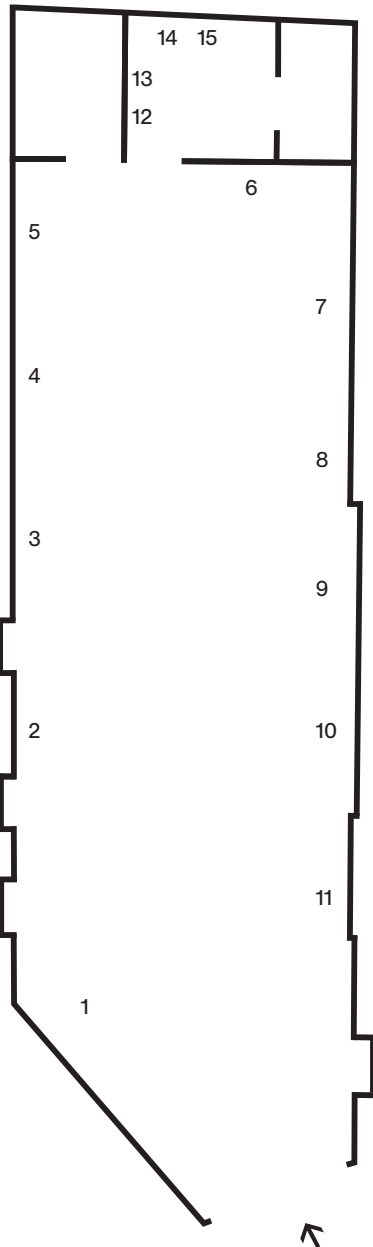
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All this resonates in *Elf Hauben*, Klodin Erb's homage to Margret Atwood. We see eleven bonnets, delicately painted, with an almost Dutch delicacy, on coloured leather, uncut, stretched out on the wall with blond and dark artificial hair. The bonnets are shown from different angles creating an impression of movement and interplay through their distribution in the space. The interweaving of painting and installation creates a cinematic effect, a phenomenon Erb has often explored in her work.

The motion of the bonnets suggests a gaze hidden under them; we feel observed by the bonnets, like servants who are supposed to remain as invisible as possible and yet know everything. The suggested gaze turns the bonnets into portraits of women made invisible, of ghostly presences, but as such they develop a peculiar restrained power that is intensified by the leather's colours, which Erb obtains from a leather dyer who supplies fashion companies. The colours determined by trends bring eroticism and elegance into play, a lust for appearance that may not fit at all with the obliterating severity of the bonnets. In the interplay with the background colours, they almost become self-empowering fashion accessories, as in the shepherdess fashion of the rococo or in the cartoonishly exaggerated drawings of the hair and headgear fetishist Heinrich Füssli. Or is it implied that trends, reflected in the colour tones, discipline as rigidly as bonnets? The uncut pieces of leather, pierced with eyelets and stretched on the wall with artificial hair, are reminiscent of hunting and skinning, body prostheses and animal fragments intertwine, resonating with an undertone of cruelty that is elusive, but nonetheless there. The meaning of the signs drifts the longer we look at *Elf Hauben*, we are literally and metaphorically in a space that allows for different directions of reading. What remains is the feeling of a disturbing lack of clarity, which corresponds with the still only partially achieved equality of women.

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- 1–11 *Elf Hauben*, 2023
Acrylic on dyed lambskin, synthetic hair, eyelets
119 × 100 cm
111 × 108 cm
139 × 96 cm
128 × 96 cm
120 × 92 cm
104 × 105 cm
112 × 89 cm
115 × 85 cm
107 × 96 cm
125 × 91 cm
107 × 94 cm
- 12 *Essen, Sex und Kleider #48b*, 2022
Collage, framed
44.1 × 33.1 cm
- 13 *Essen, Sex und Kleider #48a*, 2022
Collage, framed
44.1 × 33.1 cm
- 14 *Essen, Sex und Kleider #47*, 2022
Collage, framed
44.1 × 33.1 cm
- 15 *Essen, Sex und Kleider #48c*, 2022
Collage, framed
44.1 × 33.1 cm