

Text: «Joie de vivre» Hans-Joachim Müller (translated)

Creation has never truly been completed. The seven-day plan never quite held up. As soon as man stood on two legs, he was missing a woman. And that was the end of rest. And because there's always something left to be re-created, the center of creation handed over creative responsibility to art. And ever since, there's been a dispute over who's more successful: evolution, or the sculptor **Claire Ochsner**, who tends a little Garden of Paradise in Frenkendorf, in the canton of Basel-Landschaft—where the whims of creation peek joyfully over the garden walls, enough to make neighbors and passersby envious.

Not that this colorful population only feels at home outdoors. But outside, in the garden park, between flower beds and bushes, by the path and on small wall ledges—that's their true habitat. And that's where they belong, where their species can be identified from afar by their brightly colored costumes and gently flowing silhouettes, where they proudly present their slender bodies, stretching and curling their supple limbs like tentacles. It's a kind of balancing and dancing on the narrow ridge between the organic and the inorganic world. The forms appear without origin, yet strangely familiar. Some seem shaped from cones and cubes, others from fruit and tuber. In none of them are the welded shells not also possible leaves; none have wings, tails, or legs that couldn't just as easily come from a geometric as from a vegetative source. Some are more about body, others more about ornament. Some recall insects, others figures—here more birdlike, there more like a plant, a jellyfish, or an octopus just having crawled from the water and now extending its ring of arms as if to greet.

They stand still or move gently in the wind, rotate with the sun, and are content beneath blue skies—or just as content under the snow caps that winter places on them. They rise into full form when clouds hang low and days remain gray, and they are, truly, the only ones whose cheerful colors never fade. They are all wonderful virtuosos—star dancers, master balancers, peacock-wheel spinners, mocker of gravity, equilibrium artists, joyful beings, playful deniers of the straight line, masters of serpentine travesty and arms curling into ringlets and snail-like spirals. And all of them are shape-shifters, like Proteus, the mythical sea god and seal herder, who could never quite be grasped because he delighted in slipping into new forms with skill and ease. It's the same in Claire Ochsner's realm. Spend a little time there, and you begin to see all the relationships—but just as quickly you notice the variations and mutations. Let's put it this way: this is the most cheerful possible interpretation of creation's responsibilities. The species reproduces cheerfully—and in doing so reminds us of the hanging spiral, which seems infinite because we can't decide whether it turns upward or downward. We can only watch as it continues, always and forever, to spin.

This is an artistic realm without struggle or competition, where art objects live in radiant presence and a luminous love of life, maintaining friendly neighborly relations—and are far too absorbed in their own pleasure to cast proud or envious glances at one another. That’s rare in a work. And it’s a bit precious. And it’s probably only possible because the choreography is titled “*Joie de vivre*”—*joy of living*—and that’s what the artist has called upon her sometimes graceful, sometimes muscular ballerinas to perform.

It’s truly an old piece—and an eternal one. And there’s an old and eternal image to go with it. Matisse painted it over a hundred years ago—everything he knew of “*Joie de vivre*,” of what the joy of life might look like. Love is made in an earthly paradise, flowers are picked, music is played, dancing abounds, and a permanent high sits over the Mediterranean, bringing delight. But the stage is distant, and the tall trees provide not only shade but also separation. There’s little sense of invitation—certainly no encouragement to mingle with that faraway pleasure folk. The chances of ever reaching those distant shores seem slim. And that is the difference from the stable high over the Garden of Paradise in Frenkendorf. Claire Ochsner’s work radiates a wonderful closeness. “*Joie de vivre*” in her world means participation, not exclusivity.

No form is ever forced, no surface anything but pleasingly smooth, no piece with a single sharp edge, no point that doesn’t curl into a volute, no volume that doesn’t round out into cozy bellies or taper into elegant necks, no momentum that doesn’t play out its dynamics with delight. How else can one describe it but pure grace—grace without pathos? One never faces heavy puzzles when among the “*Joie-de-vivre*” figures of aluminum and painted polyester. You don’t need a degree or a license to converse with them. Their idiom is not foreign. In fact, their way of beginning a conversation is, when you look closely, a way of awakening and revitalizing our own original capacity for expression. Because what they speak to, what they touch in us, has always been there—just buried beneath the chatter of everyday life, hidden under the habits we call this fitness to master reality.

And it’s certainly not forbidden to discover among this colorful population our own wishes, dreams, and signs of longing. But what you won’t find are the sighs usually heard when dream images confront their own impossibility. Grace without melancholy—that in itself is astonishing. As astonishing as the entire colorful population. As if their offspring had gently landed from heaven or just leapt sparkling from the water, straightened up a little in inviting, encouraging astonishment. Everything about them appears light—nothing like labored artistry. They really can stand on a single thin leg without tiring. They can carry the crescent moon above the trees on their tentacled arms, and it’s as if even the moon is happy to go along.

So they stand there in their Garden of Paradise, free as they are. Free like jesters, rogues, and carnival figures. There are many ways to tell stories about freedom—solemn, combative, heroic ones. But the most beautiful are those that speak of the freedom of creating a positive world.

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