

Beauty and Ambiguity

INTERVIEW: Conceptual artist ALKE SCHMIDT reveals the logic behind her dramatic pictures.

If anyone's a conceptual artist, Alke Schmidt is. When we meet in a café near Liverpool Street, she immediately starts explaining that her art practice is about marrying political content with aesthetics.

By JUDITH AMANTHIS

"There are these two components. I like things to be beautiful and I love making beautiful things. Then there's the other side, that I have strong feelings about social justice, what pisses me off and what I want to comment on."

Schmidt's current exhibition is a series of collages using printed fabrics which reproduce idyllic scenes of natural beauty — a lush rain forest, a Chinese print of mountains and pine forests, a scene of the US countryside complete with lakes and elks. But this beauty is both a cliché

and "it may not be there to enjoy in reality," says Schmidt.

"These stereotyped images of a better world are all around us, but it's going down the pan."

To subvert the cliché, Schmidt inserts greys, blacks and beiges, painting in the horror — a tar-extracting machine, crowds of belching factory chimneys, what used to be a tree now a long black charcoal finger.

"At the moment, I'm on a painting trip," she says.

Schmidt has developed her ideas through a range of media and her digital photomontage series Camps (2004-5) focuses on Guantanamo and Nazi death camps.

"I'm pleased with them. They look good, but I'm interested now in more subtle, more crafty work. I love textiles. Maybe I should have been a textile designer," Schmidt laughs.

"There's a good argument that we should be making images that are easily reproducible."

"But then I realised that I'm not a political activist, I'm an artist."

"I like making things, unique things,



hand-made objects. There's a vast overproduction of images, an overflow where images are wasted.

"I like the idea of someone going to a place to see something unique. We need sustainability to move beyond capitalism."

As well as her work taking John Heartfield's anti-Nazi photomontages forward, it resounds with the debates between German Marxists Herbert

'We need sustainability to move beyond capitalism.'

...makes them stand out.

We hear from experts in the field of architecture as well as the proud owners of these marvels.

Elsewhere, Francesco da Mosto continues documenting the story of Venice in *Francesco's Venice* (BBC4, 8pm).

He was a young boy during the great flood of 1666 and, after some distressing recollections, he considers ways to safeguard the future of Venice.

...and public buildings were restricted to a relatively small part of Italy.

An important factor behind the spread of Palladianism was the publication of his seminal *Four Books of Architecture* in 1570, which set out rules that architects continue to follow even today.

Indeed, his influence can be felt everywhere, from the stately homes of England to the White House.

This remarkable programme takes



ANTOINETTE PALLADIO by Nicola Pignatelli

BBC 2

Ikaballia, 6.30 Teletubbies, 7.0 Arthur, 5 Newsround, 7.30 Roar, 8.30 Postman Pat: SDS, 8.45 Chuggington, 9.0 Fry and Toto, 9.10 Mamma Mirabelle's Movies, 9.20 Charlie and Lola, 9.30 Finley the Fire Engine, 9.45 The Koop Brothers, 10.0 Numberjacks, 10.15 Squiggling, 10.30 In the Night Garden, 11.0 Wildlife on Two, 11.30 The Daily Arts, 1.0 See Hear, 1.30 Working Lunch, 2.0 UK Snooker Championship, 2.30 Flog It! Ten of the Best.

GGHEADS: CELEBRITY SPECIAL. (T) (Stereo)
STRICTLY COME DANCING: IT TAKES TWO. (T) (Stereo) (Audio Described)
K SNOOKER CHAMPIONSHIP. (T) (Stereo)

RICK STEIN'S FOOD HEROES CHRISTMAS SPECIAL. (T) (Stereo) (Audio Described)
IGELLA'S CHRISTMAS KITCHEN. Short and Sweet. (T) (Stereo) (Audio Described)
ROES. Our Father. (T) (Stereo) (Audio Described)

London ITV

6.0 GMTV, 9.25 The Jeremy Kyle Show, 10.30 The Best of This Morning, 11.30 Christmas Cooks Challenge, 12.30 Loose Women Christmas Crackers, 1.30 ITV Lunchtime News and Weather, 2.0 House Guest... at Christmas, 2.30 Dickinson's Real Deal, 3.15 Spin Star, 4.0 Rosemary Shrager's School for Cooks, 5.0 Evacuees Reunited.

6.0 LONDON TONIGHT.
6.30 ITV EVENING NEWS AND WEATHER. (Stereo)
7.0 EMMERDALE. (Stereo) (Audio Described)
7.30 CORONATION STREET. (Stereo) (Audio Described)

8.0 THE BILL: SANTA'S LITTLE HELPER. (Stereo) (Audio Described)
9.0 POLICE, CAMERA, ACTION: DRINK DRIVING SPECIAL. (Stereo)
10.0 NEWS AT TEN AND WEATHER. (Stereo)
10.40 THE MYSTERY OF THE MISSING EARL: REAL CRIME. (Stereo)

11.40 BOOGEYMAN (Stereo) 2005 Film. A young man, traumatised by

Channel 4

6.10 The Hoobs, 6.35 Planet Cook, 7.0 Freshly Squeezed, 7.25 Everybody Loves Raymond, 7.55 Everybody Loves Raymond, 8.25 The Class, 8.55 The Class, 9.25 Will and Grace, 9.55 Ugly Betty, 10.50 Ugly Betty, 11.45 Great British Brands, 12.0 News at Noon, 12.35 Proud Parents, 12.45 Ice Cold in Alex, 1958 Film, 3.15 A Place by the Sea, 4.15 Deal or No Deal: Scrooge vs Santa, 5.0 The Paul O'Grady Show.

6.0 THE SIMPSONS. The Day the Violence Died. (T)
6.30 HOLLYOAKS. (T) (HD)
7.0 CHANNEL 4 NEWS. (T)
7.55 3 MINUTE WONDER. Lift After Coma - Blah Blah Blah. (T)

8.0 CHRISTMAS AT RIVER COTTAGE. (T)
9.0 WILLIE'S PERFECT CHOCOLATE CHRISTMAS. (T)
10.0 DESPERATE HOUSEWIVES.
11.05 THE INBETWEENERS. (T)
11.35 BALLS OF STEEL. (T)
12.25 4 MUSIC: SPECTACLE: ELVIS COSTELLO WITH ... ELTON JOHN.

...capitalism."

As well as her work taking John Heartfield's anti-Nazi photomontages forward, it resonates with the debates between German Marxists Herbert Marcuse and Walter Benjamin.

In the 1930s, Benjamin famously pinpointed modern art's reproducibility and its uses in political struggle, while Marcuse, Alke explains, "was against art slavishly replicating the situation that it's trying to critique."

"It should be bringing in the aesthetic element, but using it to create estrangement and thus distance."

Schmidt's current tactic is to seduce viewers with beauty, invite them to look and then to discover the ambiguities in that glory."

"One common denominator with the Signal show and previous shows Shrine and Wastescapes is the found object," says Schmidt.

The last two used toxic consumer waste such as soft drinks cans and food packaging to construct improbably beautiful sculptures.

Facing public-sector cutbacks in her locality, Schmidt lined up bright turquoise rubbish bags with photos and gorgeously flamboyant floral embroidery to "open out our imaginations of how we might live. The people in Walthamstow loved it."

"But art's not just about a specific story," she adds.

"If it works, it can transcend that story. People look at Guernica because it's about war, not just about one village."

Alke Schmidt's work is showing at the Signal Gallery at 96a Curtain Road, London EC2A 3AA until December 20. Call (020) 7613 1550 for further information.

ON THE INTERNET
www.alkeschmidt.com

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Mikshake! Music Bo

The Adventures of Botticelli and His Best Friend Corky, 7.10 Roary the Racing Car, 7.22 Milkshake! Christmas Songs, 7.30 The Mr. Men Show, 7.45 Make Way Noddy, 8.0 Fifi and the Flowertots, 8.10 Peppa Pig, 8.20 Roobarb and Custard Trucks, 8.25 Thomas & Friends, 8.30 Rupert Bear, 8.40 Pocomo, 8.55 The Milky Way Show, 9.0 Trisha Goodday, 10.0 Zoo Days, 10.20 Horrid Foote's Alone, 1997 Film, 12.30 Five News, 12.45 Going for Gold, 1.45 Neighbourhood, 2.15 Home and Away, 2.30 Going for Gold Extra, 3.0 The Christmas Box, 5.0 Film, 5.0 Five News with Mel Barbet, 5.30 Neighbours, 6.0 HOME AND AWAY, (Stereo) (Audio Described)

6.30 VETS IN ACTION. (Stereo) (Audio Described)

7.0 FIVE NEWS AT 7. (Stereo) (Audio Described)

7.30 UEFA CUP FOOTBALL. Hamburg v Aston Villa. (T)

10.15 HAMBURGER HILL. (T) (Stereo) (Audio Described)

1987 Film. Harrowing recreation of the battle to secure Hill 937 in the Ashau Valley during the Vietnam War. The fast-moving film follows a platoon through 11 agonising assaults over a 10-day period.

INSPIRED: Alke Schmidt.