

The Container - Pictorial Symbol of Globalisation On the Photographs of Monika Humm

A revolution in goods transport took place on the 26th of April 1956. It was on this day that the "Ideal X" left Port Newark as the first container ship of its kind with a cargo of 58 containers en route to Houston. The big idea began with son-of-a-farmer, Malcolm McLean, the "father of containerisation", who first began shipping whole trucks and their cargoes on ships and later moved on to only trailers, and finally independent containers. After two thousand years of sacks, baskets and boxes, the steel container changed the world of transport and turned the loading and unloading of ships into a highly efficient technological act.

About a hundred million containers are on the move around the World at any one time. As common as the sight of them is on trucks, ships and trains, they still hold a puzzling fascination. For the beholder the colourful building blocks tower in stacks as high as houses in depots and on ships. The complicated numbers and letters on their sides that identify origin, destination, size and manufacturer of the containers seems to be a secret code; the interior and contents a deep and worrying secret.

Monika Humm has also come across the fascinating phenomenon of the haulage container. In 2006, on the search for material for her photographic oeuvre, that she intensifies with her painting and self-developed images, she travelled to three hubs of container activity, namely, Istanbul, Hamburg and Feldkirchen. That's right, Feldkirchen, hundreds of kilometres from the sea, in the East of Munich, lies a huge container hub. While Hamburg offered grand industrial scenery of 13-stories-high stacks of steel on gargantuan ships and stone quays, the land depot allowed for a more close-up view. Here things are about something new; structures, colours, identification codes. The pictorial language of her photography nears her painting in these images and even comes to influence it.

Ever since her artist's academy training, Monika Humm has been interested in structures. In her early collections, often occupied by landscapes, surfaces and lines dominate through space and composition with the latter often in varying states of prominence. In containers, with their colours and grid textures, she has found a subject that corresponds to her painting. A documentation of global trade is not necessarily centre-stage here, but more an inspiration to create abstract colour and structural forms. The container, as an element in pictorial form, represents a cipher.

What about Istanbul? This series of pictures separates itself somewhat from the container pictures. Here a shared theme sees Monika Humm, against expectations, explore decaying ships. Empty freighters navigate the Bosphorus, rusting shipwrecks litter the Asian side, containers are orphaned in the depot. The finds here exhibit a mortality that is a rich seam, but also provide intricate lines and structures that give a contrast in their chaos to the orderliness of the horizontal and vertical lines of the containers. Within the series "Global", Istanbul becomes a symbol of a global crisis.

Dr. Erika Wäcker-Babnik

(Translation by Sergio Anton Poggio)