

Pavel Pepperstein

Neuer Aachener Kunstverein

Russian artist Pavel Pepperstein's mural painting *God of Cosmos* (all works 2002) depicts the wild eyes of an evil genie, a flat, animal nose and a wide-open mouth. The face is contorted into a grimace, and a corona of curly ringlets spreads across the wall like graffiti.

For two weeks Pepperstein worked in the Neuer Aachener Kunstverein, painting, in accordance with the show's title, 'gods and monsters', identically sized larger-than-life portraits painted at eye level on the white walls. *Goddess of Love*, *God of Stones* and *Monster of Steam* are elegant images of men, women, grotesques and birds' heads. Most of them display signs of ordinary life - sun-glasses or fashionable hair-dos. Alongside the paintings were watercolours pinned to the wall. Often the sketches depicted objects that looked like accessories to the mural: flowers and mountains, for example. Held by pins, protruding slightly from the wall, a circlet of tiny, colourful leaves and birds' heads wreathed the *Goddess of Birds*.

From the first floor over the stairwell to the roof, every surface was covered with the huge mural. Step by step, it became progressively unclear in which direction to read it: the *Monster of Steam* looked at his neighbour with barely suppressed aggression; a chubby-cheeked, angelic little boy, the *God of Philosophy* ruled his empire of oceans, rivers, mountains and little soldiers (it remained unexplained whether they had gathered for war, manoeuvres or a parade). With connections spreading out in all directions, the tales seemed too complex for a straight story.

'In a certain way, every human being imagines himself to be a god or a monster (or both at the same time)', writes Pepperstein in the text accompanying the show. In a conversation from about ten years ago he and a circle of similarly inclined Russian Conceptualists imagined how a video should show them as 'priests of their own cult, who staged sacrifices for themselves. Gods, who understood their godliness as passive vegetation, or humans who, as a result of the Fall, have lost the ability to live a normal, human existence, and in a needy, crippled godliness, decay like toys in an attic.'

The enraptured yet nihilistic tone was part of the plan. At the beginning of the 1990s the Soviet empire had just fallen to

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pieces and so the artists started what they called 'medicinal hermeneutics'. Calling themselves 'inspectors', Pavel Pepperstein, Yuri Leidermann and Sergei Anufriev proclaimed their idea of the 'total investigation'. They identified the Soviet Union as a semiotic construction, which they approached using linguistics, cultural theory and psychoanalysis, driven by the Russian yearning to know and describe everything - a yearning marked at the same time by the consciousness that all activity is ultimately senseless.

Apart from films and a great deal of poetry Pepperstein and his colleagues mainly produced naturalistic, highly fanciful, child-like drawings that are hard to reconcile with their radical, Dadaistic claims. Part of the myth surrounding the group is that their Moscow Conceptualism was rooted in the world, and spirit, of children's books. The avant-garde of the previous generation had earned their living in graphic design or book illustration, and Pepperstein's own father, Pavel Pivovarov, used picture albums to develop a form of storytelling that was both lyrical and visual. Pepperstein himself similarly uses an imaginative combination of drawings and word games, theory and exaggerated fable. Boris Groys has described his approach as like a 'theoretical family conversation', something that comes out of nothing and disintegrates into nothing.

Wall paintings cannot survive for long in an exhibition hall where shows come and go. After the end of 'Gods and Monsters' the watercolours were taken down and a troupe of painters covered the grotesques and faces. 'We are actually carrying out Titanic deeds, not by constructing enormous buildings, but by eroding them', Pepperstein once wrote, giving his vocation an almost divine dimension. So we have reason to suspect that gods - or monsters - will remain lurking in Aachen like something from a fairy tale.

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Frieze

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