

So, what do you think?



Daniel Hunziker is much more to Nina Staehli than just her long-time scenographer. A conversation with the designer about the artist and how he challenges her to be more radical in her exhibitions and to push her boundaries.

Interview by Stephanie Ringel¹

Daniel Hunziker, how would you describe Nina Staehli?

Nina Staehli the artist and Nina Staehli the person are one and the same. She embodies her art and her art represents her. Her versatility is a reflection of her life and way of thinking.

She stages interventions and performances, makes films and multimedia projects; her work cycles comprise sculptures, paintings and installations; she brings together the worlds of film, photography, literature and theater...

...she studied acting and art, she travels a lot, she is very communicative and emotional. All of which you feel in her work. Which I find fascinating because life itself is multidimensional. For instance, when she writes texts about her work, she may have been reading Goethe's Faust before and honed in on specific words or sentences that have jogged her thinking. In another context, these take on a new power and become part of her art.

There is also one such sentence in your creative relationship, right?

Yes, that's right. She put a quote from John Paul II into one of her paintings: "I have looked for you, now you have come, and I thank you."

A postcard with this same quote is on the wall behind your desk.

A hotel in Berlin bought the original painting. But since I liked it so much and the sentence moved me so deeply, Nina made me a second painting, which is on display in my home. Here in the studio I only have a postcard of it as inspiration. She's the person I had always been searching for: the biggest source inspiration for my work as a designer, engineer and scenographer. She came to

me and I am thankful for that. Her art, her way of thinking, her healthy dose of naïveté and her constant questioning of things keep me on my toes.

What sorts of things inform her work?

Nina's work is mainly informed by rage. She draws her strength from it to create art.

What is it that makes her blood boil?

Injustice. That's why her work is often very expressive – and that comes out clearly in *Glory Land*. The work cycle is about the displacement of the Cherokee Indians and the Trail of Tears, but she uses that event to address the fundamental problems of migratory movements. Another huge wave of displacement is taking place in Trump's America, this time among people from countries whose entry into the U.S. the president has denied. And all the people without a valid visa who had previously been tolerated in society and are now being deported. Similar things are happening all over the world. It is a universal topic that affects millions of people – and is at the root of a new Trail of Tears. Nina has found her own artistic language: her topics are always highly relevant – displacement, sexism, greed, violence... She cannot ignore what people are suffering from worldwide and she calls it out.

For the *Glory Land* work cycle, Staehli traveled for two months through the United States. Did you two talk about the project before she went?

She brings me into her thought process early on, sends me e-mails with her initial ideas, maybe with excerpts of texts she's read, images she's seen somewhere. From these bits and pieces of thoughts the topic gradually comes to light. Then she retreats to her studio in Berlin for weeks on end and I don't hear a word from her. I totally get it – I work the same way. Once you have all the information you need, you feel good but also vulnerable, and you have to work out the next steps in the process by yourself.

Were you in touch with her after she had finished her trip through the U.S. and was working on the *Glory Land* cycle as part of her residency in Kansas where she made over 100 paintings?

I didn't hear much about that time. She must have been working up a storm. Unfortunately, she had sent me an early version of the *Glory Land* video, which hadn't been edited at all and had no sound, and I thought it was very bad. Since then she hasn't sent me anymore unfinished work.

And how do you feel about the video now?

It has become one of my favorite films.

Critique can be quite demoralizing.

Sometimes after three months of silence she'll send me an e-mail with a photo – and I have to respond quickly. Writing back is essential in that moment even if I think: "It's not quite there yet..."

For her, I'm a tough critic. I visited her at her studio in Lucerne recently. All the sculptures she was going to put in her next show were out. While she left to make me a coffee, I rearranged everything, took away some pieces, put in others, and when she got back, I said: "Look – this is what you want to show!"

The artist's work is not easily accessible. Some people say it is irritating and dark. Do you share this opinion?

Nina has deliberately abstained from getting involved in the classic art industry. She doesn't have a gallerist, she ignores market mechanisms that could win her fame, she doesn't subscribe to any artistic trends, and never mentions any artists she admires from the scene. That makes it hard to place her, but as a result she is closer to the issues of our time than it may seem at first glance.

Where does she get her inspiration?

Everyday life. In social interactions. From marginal groups like transvestites, single mothers, disabled people, failed investment bankers. These people, defined by their otherness, need to find their way in the world. Imagine people are fancy cakes with a flawless icing on top. Now imagine that people who do not fulfill the criteria of what is considered correct or normal today – their icing has a crack. And it is underneath that crack that we can see what is real. For Nina, that is the moment of truth.

Because life is suddenly honest and gives her more material for her work as an artist?

In her work it is always about showing prototypical figures without perfect icing. That is the case in Ruby Dean & the White Silence, Glory Land and Touching Heroes. At the beginning of this conversation, we mentioned Nina's versatility. By creating work in cycles, it helps her to portray these hidden flaws and difficulties in way that mirrors their complexity: in painting, videos, photography and sculpture. Her works should never be viewed individually, but as part of a larger story and context.

Narration as social criticism?

You could put it that way, yes. Nina knows that many things will never change. But she can't just sit back and look at the icing on the cake. She's determined to express herself. Her tirelessness helps her find new topics to confront. She only has inner peace when she is working.

In early 2018 you worked together on the design of Hotel Beau Séjour in Lucerne. What makes working together exciting?

She was hired to make several art installations for the hotel. I designed the furniture line. That was exciting but rather unusual for us. Usually we develop ideas together for architectural projects or exhibitions and then make them happen. Our work is shaped by reciprocity, by trust. We see each other as equals. The hierarchy shifts from project to project and we push ourselves forward as a team. We never get bored.

How is a typical project structured?

Stockberg Hotel in Siebnen, Schwyz, is a good example. For this hotel with business apartments, we sat down together to figure out what the hotel was all about and what the interior design should be like. You could say the building was the body that we breathed a new spirit into.

How does it look?

We focused on Stockberg mountain, the valley's former spinning industry, the spectacular landscape. Nina made an installation of strings with the mountain in the background took pictures through them. The abstract images that resulted from that are now hanging on the walls of the hotel. However, I used the mountain motif for the signs in the hotel. Since there are no employees, we wanted the art to take over the job of the receptionist. The figurative sculptures, reminiscent of silkworms, encounter guests throughout the building. It's always like that: when we've talked about what's important to us and what we want to do, everyone goes home and gets to work. I don't know what she's doing and she doesn't know what I'm doing. And incredibly it works out every time.

You've known each other since 2005. How did your collaboration start?

With Nina's Sotterraneo exhibition in Cham and Genoa. Back then I had a gallery in Rapperswil and was mostly curating exhibitions. From the first moment on we got along and got to work. We packed her old Volvo with her art and drove to Genoa. On the ride we discovered that she loves the same sort of melancholic and poetic music as I do: Tom Waits, Element of Crime, Leonard Cohen, Nike Cave. In Genoa we built everything down to the lights ourselves – we had no budget. Until this day we do not pay each other for our work. We repay one another by providing inspiration and support. And it is in that way that we have worked on well over twenty exhibitions together.

Nina Staehli often makes use of other people's lives for her work. How much Daniel Hunziker is there?

I've never thought about that because it's not important to me. She comes to me with a topic, an exhibition idea. She tells me about it and I listen. Then I interpret her work in my own way in the architecture of the exhibition. At this point I only do scenography jobs if I am allowed to interpret the core of the art in my own way.

Where do you see yourself in her work?

I tell my part of the story. For example, in the Self-portraits – My Life as a Dog exhibition at SCHAURAUM Luzern, I lined the walls of the room with golden emergency blankets and hung Nina's work there. You could hear a little rustle whenever someone walked in. The atmosphere seemed to be something precious and luxurious. But, in reality, if you remove the blanket, the misery of the individual comes to light – the desperation, the loneliness, the worries. Nowhere is that as evident as the Italian

beaches where the first aid workers wrap these golden blankets around refugees to keep them from getting hypothermia.

Did the visitors to the exhibition understand this critique?

No, I don't think so. But I also don't do my scenographic work for the majority of visitors – I do it for the ten percent of them who are willing to think about the fact that we are questioning things and sending a message. That is a key difference between Nina and me.

Can you be more specific?

I am more soft-spoken and like subtle messages. We've even done exhibitions where the wall text is written in a glossy white font on matte white paper so that you need to look at the text from a certain angle in order to be able to read anything.

Nina Staehli gives you a lot of freedom. The risk of overinterpretation is in the air.

It is not about her or me, but about conveying a message. Nina does that with her art; I reinforce her stories with my scenography. The material expression of the artist is often only the tip of the iceberg for me. The thoughts behind or underneath it are what's interesting – and then to bring these to light.

Are you ever a protagonist in Staehli's performances such as the Big Heads?

Although I incorporated them into my scenography in the Heller Wahnsinn exhibition at the Voegele Kultur Zentrum, I do not want to be an actor. Nina asks me time and again but I don't feel comfortable with that. I prefer to make the furniture for the sets of her film shoots.

Looking back on thirteen years of working together, what have you learned from her?

Depth. Perseverance. To welcome inspiration. I have become a better designer thanks to her. I need loyalty, trust and respect – only then can I work courageously. Recently she wrote to me that she loves my anarchic attitude. Because I stood my ground with pride in the face of a furniture manufacturer. Our collaboration is productive because we want it to be. Once we decide to get down to business, we have made a clear commitment.

I think that's the only way to make good things.

Hotel Beau Séjour is a good recent example of that. We were on site the Wednesday before the opening, setting up furniture, hanging the art. During the coffee break a new, recently hired employee asked us: "Did you go out of the way to take time to help today?" She didn't know who we were. For her we were just two people wearing overalls with drills in our hands. It is a good image for us: we work together and we have fun as though it were a leisure activity. We delve into the other's world – with a lot of concentration, professionalism, and pleasure.

What are you looking forward to?

To the Greed exhibition in 2019, which will be on display at Kunsthaus Zofingen and Kunst Galerie Fürth. But in general for me it's the present moment that counts. It's important to keep our minds open to the next idea. We share a desire for freedom in our work, the play between proximity and distance. I think that's why we are also not a couple.

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