

## Ruby Dean

The work cycle titled *Ruby Dean and the White Silence* deals with the ambivalence of appearance and reality, and the purity and poetry of silence. White as the epitome of purity and innocence always bears the characteristics of clinical cleanliness and emptiness; there are echoes of loneliness and melancholy. But what lies beneath the white that spans the works as a pure façade? It opens up associative spaces, evokes Edgar Allen Poe, who saw white as an illustration of the ominous and menacing, but also Wassily Kandinsky, who in his book *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* remarked: "White acts on our psyche like a deep and absolute silence. It is not a dead silence, but one pregnant with possibilities." One also thinks of Herman Melville's white whale, pursued around the globe by an obsessive Captain Ahab. The white of the whale symbolises the unknown and the metaphysical void. The white appears as innocence and horror, as the absence of all colours and, at the same time, as the sum of all colours, everything and nothing. This ambivalence is an important aspect of the Ruby Dean cycle. The artist is constantly questioning what lies behind: what happens when one begins to scratch at the seemingly flawless surface? What lies behind that polished surface? (1)

Nina Staehli has split the series of works into four parts: Ruby Dean's Zoological Garden, Ruby Dean in America, Ruby Dean on the Bernina Pass, and her Bombs.

Beginnings...

It all began on a remote farm in Gepp, Arkansas. Ruby Dean lived there as an ordinary farmer in the 1950s. Following her husband's death she was forced to earn a living and provide for her family in an unworthy way.

So what is Nina Staehli actually up to here? She dares to involve in her artistic work people chosen almost at random. She uses the life of Ruby Dean - without asking - and continues to write it, open-ended. She makes the ordinary extraordinary, and lends a voice to these characters in a way that is new and surprising. She goes further still and assumes Ruby Dean's full identity, partly as a fictional character. The fact that she continually creates and rejects new realities seems to stimulate the observer's own curiosity and associations all the more.

(1)short version of the text by Melanie Grütter