

Maren Lübcke-Tidow

Stephanie Kiwitt's photo series of recent years and the clear and space-related staging of her work preserve their austere tension by means of a finely balanced interaction between conceptual rigour and visual opulence. The precise work on the individual picture – the compositional logic in which the subjects are embedded, the unconditional cohesion of each photographically fixed pictorial space – is just as significant as the content-related, context-opening editing of the photographs into series of works, and the harmony of the pictures in exhibitions. Approaching the limits of the picture, where the visible transforms into something else and where new levels of attribution, new semantics open up – Stephanie Kiwitt works towards these edges of the palpably pictorial in a process of consistent reduction. At the same time, however, her pictures remain permeated with pure visuality, towards which she works with relish, especially in a large format. This duality of visual reduction and yet also abundance, of rigour and opulence, which can be found in every single one of her pictures, is also present in her current work, "Choco Choco". Six large-format pictures from this extensive series, which was created in the last two years, are currently on show at Galerie Weingrüll.

The photographs from "Choco Choco" were taken in craft workshops, in chocolateries. Although it has long been an industrially-manufactured mass product that can be bought cheaply in a supermarket, another side of chocolate still exists: chocolate as a luxury good. This is demonstrated by the small manufactories that have emerged, particularly in recent times, guided by a self-perception of high quality standards and therefore demanding trained craftwork and a careful treatment of the raw materials. The photographs show excerpts of the production process.

In her work over recent years, Stephanie Kiwitt has constantly addressed the subject of the thoroughly commercialised world of Western wealth, examining in the process how we deal with machines: "Self Kassa" referred to the fully automated bartering of goods for money, while "Gym" addressed forms of self-optimisation with the help of fitness machines, to which bodies subject themselves. In contrast to "Capital Décor", in which the promises of the consumer culture attempt to trump each other in a loud cacophony of signs, "Choco Choco" now focuses on a single product, steeped in luxury, for example the chocolate praline: made by hand in small factories with very few machines, quality-tested and awarded a seal, the noble good is placed on the market for high-income earners. The small manufactory might be seen to represent an alternative model to globally operating companies, with whom the cultivation and trade of the cocoa bean, which still exudes a sense of (colonially permeated) exoticism, remains exploitative in spite of all fair trade agreements. The lifestyle and ethos of the craftsperson promises a different social morality, even a form of saving the critical wealthy citizen in a complex age. But does this actually express nothing more than a new form of moral conservatism? The political discrepancy presented here, and which the consumer embedded in this comfort economy cannot permanently ignore, must form part of our interpretation when we view these new photographs by Stephanie Kiwitt. The title of the work, "Choco Choco", suggesting frivolous and carefree enjoyment and creating a contrast to the coolly analytical pictures, is an initial allusion to this discrepancy – a rupture that also goes through the pictures. Stephanie Kiwitt's works are not led by a documentary interest, which might uncover possible contradictions. None of the well-kept secrets that are intrinsic to small manufactories and which ensure their survival are revealed: none of the processes, from the selection of the cocoa bean, its origin and trading conditions, the complete process of manufacture up to the exquisitely packaged finished product, are made visible. Factories, operational activity, the

functions of machines or the manual processing – none of this is shown to its full extent, and neither are orders or overviews. Instead, without any staged assistance, Kiwitt concentrates on (few) details, which are magnified to an oversized degree. Thus the details of machines, with their metallic and worn dullness, are raised to a monumental level in the same manner as the chocolate, this “brown gold”, which flows through them like liquid glass or paint.

Formally, in “Choco Choco” Stephanie Kiwitt works with the contrasts of the organically flowing, physical chocolate mass and the sharp-edged, smooth apparatuses, strewn with pictures of hands which, subordinate to the material, repeatedly show the viewer the manual share of production. Compositionally, Kiwitt works precisely and rigorously on a schematic narrowing of the pictorial space, the pictures suggest hardly any depth, but instead work towards an exceedingly seductive surface aesthetic that is permeated with an exaggerated physical presence of things and bodies. This formally severe and technically perfected approach, and her dispassionate, object-oriented view cites the genre of advertising photography. The boldness of the high-gloss, large-format prints are also typical instruments of a programmatic and calculating (advertising) industry that generates stimulation. Yet Stephanie Kiwitt knows how to subtly and purposefully breach these veiling instruments by consistently including in her picture the machines’ traces of use, the smears of chocolate that cling to them, and the sticky remains that find their way under the skin and nails of the chocolatier. These pictures do not correspond with the constantly polished and antiseptic working environment that one might expect for a foodstuff and luxury good. Once we have noticed them, these disruptive moments gradually take up more space in our viewing of the pictures, demanding a form of attention and identification that lead away from the surface of the picture, into its depths. By these means, Stephanie Kiwitt unmaskes in an extremely subtle manner by showing also that which remains in the process of manufacturing, refining and completing and which is simply left over, raising it to the centre of the picture, equal to everything else. She remains in the material, in the things and objects themselves, she has no compulsion to present, reveal or add anything. That is Kiwitt’s special ability, for a promise to the picture is displayed here, with its own intrinsic semantic. The fact that this promise to the picture is also a promise to the medium – photography – underlines ultimately Kiwitt’s decision in favour of a loose and unframed hanging, thus also openly exhibiting the haptics of the backing material. With this, along with the decision to print some pictures in black and white, and others in colour, the artist brings the imaging procedure, photography (which always retreats behind the picture in advertisements), back to the surface, granting visibility to the photographic process and the methods of composition. Remaining in the picture and working on the picture are suitable for generating meaning, and are immensely encouraging.

Translation from German: Carolyn Kelly