

Michael Najjar ›bionic angel«

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What form will our species take in the future? How long will a body be able to live once all biological inhibitors have been disabled? Questions like these have long held a special fascination for our future-gazing contemporaries, and the 1970s in particular saw an outpouring of books offering graphic visions of the future – views of how we would be living in the 21st century that, with the benefit of present hindsight, all seem to have slightly overshoot the mark.

Born in 1966, Michael Najjar surely devoured all these books with the same furious interest as the author of these lines. Today his latest fourteen part work series ›bionic angel« embodies a vision parts of which are already current reality. Its theme focuses on how technology will control the future course of human evolution. To present this in visual terms, Najjar creates a world of cavorting danaiids, hermaphrodites and other hybrid creatures – in short, the human image after its metamorphosis into a new form of existence. At the same time he also shows shots of huge white tanks in which human bodies are deposited – the remains of people flash frozen immediately after death in hopes of being thawed out and brought back to life at a later time when such feats are possible.

Najjar's ›bionic angel« refers to so-called GRIN technologies - the point of convergence and exponential development for genetics, robotics, information technology and nanotechnology. Sooner or later this will prove a watershed for the traditional interplay of body, soul and spirit. Najjar himself readily confesses that he's totally fascinated by virtual reality and would love to beam himself into a virtual state where unprecedented forms of communication are empowered at the speed of data networks. After extensive background research – including talks with surgeons and scientists at the leading Berlin Charité hospital – the artist fashioned the astonishing portrait of a young woman whose face is connected to the fiber tracts of her own brain. Digital fusion of a 3D model of the neuronal fibers with the facial portrait alludes to those potential cognitive linkages which could soon radically extend the range of communication forms we now have at our command.

Najjar's work is also based on idealized representations of the human body in the art of Ancient Greece and Rome, the Renaissance and mannerism – as in his Laocoön group of figures – whose form and content he reinterprets in the context of cutting-edge technology. Thus he refers equally to the myths of Ancient Greece and to the guises they assume and interpretations they have received over the centuries. In Najjar's work the moment of metamorphosis becomes the key metaphor for the technological transformation of the human body in its future existence. The snakes which in the Greek myth strangle the Trojan priest Laocoön and his two sons are thus transformed into writhing data cables which envelop the three figures with their grasp, piercing and linking their bodies. Yet another work shows countless bodies of young male clones suspended on thin white wires in an organ storage bank. A work shocking in the intensity of its aesthetic overkill that warns the viewer to keep a safe critical distance.

Social developments and utopian visions have long been a focal concern of Najjar's media art. As a student of the Berlin Bildo Academy for Art and Media in the late 1980s – well before the advent of the digital age - he was already familiar with the latest imaging technologies, and embraced them as his formal means of aesthetic expression. In the 1990s he published a series of digitally modified photographic reportages in a deliberate move away from the canon of pure documentary photography and its claim to present an authentic view of reality which caused anger and consternation among a great many viewers.

His most recent works now merge analogue and digital photography together with computer-generated pictorial elements into a form of expression which Najjar himself terms "hybrid photography". With ›bionic angek‹ he has succeeded in achieving a forceful fusion of real and virtual content. This unprecedented visual texture touches on reality to create a utopian world similar to - but far surpassing - that shown in films like ›Blade Runner‹ or ›The Matrix‹ or the parallel universes of ›Second Life‹. Whether such worlds are experienced as life-enhancing or as unsettling visions of horror depends very much on the perceptions of individual viewers.