

Heidi, the Dracula of the Alps

By Oliver Camenzind, 22. December 2015

A Romanian artist throws a critical look at Heidi and asks the question about national myth building and outdated images of women anew.

Klara, without a wheel chair, stands up and lumbers across a rich alpine field into the arms of her overjoyed father. Klara, on the staircase, dares to advance step by step down the stairs into the arms of her overjoyed father.

The scene, varied countless times, tells, repeatedly, the same old story of Heidi and her friends, who find happiness on the sun spoiled flanks of the Swiss mountains. It has been edited together by Delia Popa, Romanian artist and guest in Zurich, who has embraced the folklorically charged material. In the process she asks questions that any Swiss myth sees itself confronted with.

Whether Marignano or Wilhelm Tell and the Rütli- Oath: We always get into the same exasperating and infertile debates about the old sagas of Switzerland. The cultural identity of this land has become the contentious issue for political strategists.

In the course of the new celebrations of old stories did we recently acquire a new Heidi film. What exactly is new about it remains, factually, unclear; it is not a revisiting of old material nor a new interpretation, at most it is a repetition of the same children's book in the alpine idyll. That the Heidi material doesn't even fit to the political reality of this land and draws a more than questionable picture of Switzerland, needs no explanation.

Still it does not surprise that the film benefits from a lot of popularity. The work of the tourism industry, of advertising and recently of some formerly well regarded feuilletons has not remained without effect.

Dracula Meets Heidi

Delia Popa, who has been familiarised with the Heidi theme after reading a critical text by Ulrike Ulrich, approaches it with some humour and surely with more phantasy than the makers of the latest family soap. Popa shows for example parallels to the Dracula material, who has been made a resident in her country by Bram Stoker, and confronts the video-collage of Heidi adaptations by several countries with linoleum prints, on which you can see mice chanting feminist paroles. She paints the Grimsel (mountain)

directly on the wall– without frame, without borders - so that it seems to be taking up the whole space and has to be accepted without commentary.

Finally, she says she would gladly like to grapple with Heidi in a performance.

The exhibition is on view until the 27th of this month in the “Haus zum Palmbaum” on Rindermarkt street 14. The work has been developed within the context of the index-Freiraum residency. The exhibition shows no finished work though: “The research has just begun”, says Popa - and it could take a while still; so fascinated is the artist by the subject matter.

In spite all is Popa’s Freiraum small- and that relates not just to the exhibition room- when she tries her hand at the Heidi material. As she doesn’t, so far, succeed to create something really new out of it: to say that the perception of Switzerland and the image of women, as depicted in Heidi belong to yesterday, is somehow not enough. What we need What we need IS – as pathetic as it may sound – a consistent Today and fertile impulses for a Tomorrow.

Translated from German by Delia Popa, revised by Giles Eldridge.