

Barbara Frischmuth
Through a Glass Darkly

On the Exhibition of Paintings by Lotte Lichtblau

It was on a day in May 1976 that I met Lotte Lichtblau. This meeting was preceded by the odyssey of a letter that Lotte had written to me regarding one of my books that her sister had brought back for her from a visit to Austria—a letter in which she wrote that she too was familiar with every square inch of Altaussee. For lack of a better address, she had mailed it to me in care of the *Seehotel*; the letter was then forwarded to Oberweiden, my home at the time, and from there it was sent back to America—namely, to Oberlin, Ohio where I was spending a few months as writer in residence. Instead of a written reply, I called Lotte up and we arranged a meeting, since I planned to travel shortly thereafter to New York together with my then-two-year-old son to spend a couple of days visiting painter Paul Rotterdam on Lower Broadway. When, finally, in early May, I stood before her open apartment door with the child who had fallen asleep in the cab wrapped across my shoulder, I caught a glimpse beyond Lotte's head of a picture of Loser hanging on the wall and, below it, a small table covered by a tablecloth that had to have come from Aussee. And when she then invited me inside, it was in a language displaying not the slightest trace of an accent—and that almost 40 years after she and her family had been driven out of Austria.

Then, while my child went about despoiling the apartment with the crayons Lotte had given him to keep him occupied for a while, the two of us sat there and talked and talked, which, by the way, we still do at our fairly regular encounters—whether in New York, in Vienna or in Altaussee. Then, I spoke about "*Die Mystifikation der Sophie Silber*," my novel that would be published that fall, whereby the account was repeatedly punctuated by Lotte getting up to bring out one of her paintings that dealt the same theme. At times, the many correspondences almost caused me to break out in goose pimples—especially at the sight of what was practically the image of one of my protagonists inside the salt mine. A short while later, in July 1976, Lotte, in the company of her old friends Maria and Anestis Logothetis—he an avant-garde literary and musical artist, they a couple with whom I would later share a vacation house for many years—came to Altaussee, and we spent countless evenings engrossed in lively conversations about—not surprisingly—painting, music and literature, whereby the sparks really flew on occasion, which is also why we never ran out of things to discuss.

More than a quarter century has passed since then and we're still exchanging pictures, books, thoughts and family news. The fact that it has become possible, in spite of it all, to exhibit Lotte Lichtblau's paintings—even if it's not in Altaussee, the "Middle Point of the World" as the title of one of her Altaussee works puts it, then at least in the capital of Ausseerland, in Bad Aussee—can be called an instance of that "compensatory justice" that, despite materializing much less frequently than it is summoned forth, does indeed exist.

It is not up to me to comment on Lotte Lichtblau's artistic career or to specify the origins and methodology of her painting; art historians and theoreticians are responsible for that. I only want to describe how I feel about her pictures, and what I have experienced through them and with them. It is primarily in dark, glowing colors that Lotte Lichtblau recalls the childhood that took her back, summer after summer, to Altaussee, as if she actually were looking "through a glass darkly," perhaps to keep from being blinded by the rays of those early memories. "Here in Altaussee," she once told me, "is where I learned to see—that is, to paint—by staring for hours, even days at Trisselwand. And by doing so, I grasped what form is." Trisselwand is still the mountain in her paintings. Beyond all feelings for this place as her homeland or lack thereof, this Trisselwand is a formal reproach that she has spent her whole life working out.

Over the years during which I have been consciously taking part in cultural life and affairs, a whole series of discussions about the concept of homeland has taken place, but this has not succeeded in entirely restoring its innocence. Too many dastardly political deeds have been committed in its name, its repeated abuse has been too excessive, and it has been sentimentalized too often in a way that makes a rational encounter a difficult undertaking.

An artistic homeland, on the other hand, has basically nothing to do with blood, but rather with images and with sensory impressions, though above all with form. A landscape only then becomes a lifelong source of stimulus when one can make something out of it and with it, when it plays a role not only in perceiving with the senses but also in imagining. Ausseerland seems to possess something of this quality. For Lotte Lichtblau and for others as well, it has been a "landscape of the soul," something that enables her to recognize the innermost part of her being or at least to experience intimations of it.

The Altaussee, for example, that shines forth to me from Lotte Lichtblau's paintings is an Altaussee that has gone through her head and her hands—that is, one that has been transformed and that deals with recognizable Altaussee elements and qualities as with a quotation or an allusion, an Altaussee that is, nevertheless, so much more than the

community at the foot of Mt. Loser whose praises are sung and attractions touted so widely. It is an Altaussee that has a lesson in astonishment and dread to inculcate into even someone like me—born and raised here, and for whom this place likewise plays an important role (not only for me as a person, but also for my writing); an Altaussee that seems to embody all the joys and all the horrors, all that is dark no less than all that is light. And only in this way will this place, which sometimes threatens to petrify into a touristic icon, become one that can be experienced artistically again and again, and thereby truly become “Middle Point of the World.”

Something else that my friendship with Lotte Lichtblau and all of our conversations over the past 26 years have confronted me with is a vision of my birthplace that goes back further than my own and, since it is to a certain extent the perspective of an outsider, is also one of greater precision. One that even then was able to compare, as opposed to my view of things, which was not afforded such opportunities of comparison since I hardly left Ausseerland during my first ten years.

For me, the house, the garden, the lake and the mountains were what made up my everyday life, and these could also seem rather banal to me at times, whereas my longings imagined landscapes of a totally different kind, landscapes conveyed to me in tales or about which I had read. Inspired by the children’s edition of “Thousand and One Nights,” I dreamt of palm groves, river- and seascapes, even deserts, and this sort of longing later even influenced my choice of what I would study at school.

I wanted to get away, and this from quite early on, as far away as possible in order to satisfy my curiosity about everything that went beyond Aussee, whereas Lotte, as I see it, made a very early decision in favor of Aussee. For Aussee as her landscape of choice, as the landscape of her imagination, the one with which she maintained her view of things, and the one she painted over and over again and she renewed this view as soon as it was again possible for her to do so.

I acknowledge that many of her stories about the Altaussee before my time have also expanded my view of things. For instance, her accounts of her grandmother who organized a bridge salon in Café Fischer in the '20s and early '30s, and one of whose lines has been preserved in my children’s book “*Sommersee*”—from the one Lotte tells about the time she received a gift, and her grandmother said to her: “Now you can pass it on to someone else. After all, you’ve enjoyed it already.” She told me about the prewar dances on the meadow by the lake, and about bathing at the lakeside swim club, things of which there was hardly a

trace left during my childhood, though just enough to enable me to imagine how it had been when Lotte was a little girl.

What I want to say with this is that Lotte Lichtblau's paintings don't show us what we Ausseers already know anyway; rather, it is that they—ultimately also the subtle repositories of all the narratives from the memory of painter Lotte Lichtblau—augment and enhance all of our recollections in that they add something consciously perceived and consciously formed to that which we often enough unconsciously perceive. A landscape as well only then becomes a landscape when it encounters a *transforming* perspective, a point of view that consciously sets it in relation to other real and possible landscapes and brings out what is typical of it, and perhaps of it alone. Otherwise it always remains just another place.

Regarded in this way, these pictures have enabled me to see much that I never would have seen in Aussee without them. And they have been the inspiration for a few neatly turned phrases to be found in one or two of my prose works. For this reason alone I want to thank Lotte Lichtblau for her images, and for the fact that, as a child, she looked at Trisselwand long enough to discover so much that none of us—and maybe this applies particularly to born-and-bred locals—would otherwise have seen.

(Opening speech, June 2nd, 2002)