

Interview with Charlotte Lichtblau conducted in New York from January 30, 2000 to February 4, 2000

Basically it has to do with love and loss.

Why paint?

AL: I suggest that you start off by telling what is central for you.

Charlotte Lichtblau: Under no circumstances do I want to try to put into words what my paintings represent. After all, if I could do that, I wouldn't have to paint. That can't be verbalized because it would immediately begin to distort it all, to make a caricature or propaganda out of everything. I can only say why they came about, and that I definitely felt the need to keep from losing what I had seen and known. I see my life in such a way that it was necessary for me to do this art, out of a sense of need, and for this reason to transform from these origins. To speak in concrete terms about painting, I can perhaps say that one essential factor was that my father bought me a herbarium when I was a child because I liked to gather flowers. But when I saw what became of the flowers—lying there all dried out—I was very disappointed. That's why I started to draw flowers, very realistically. That was actually the beginning, when I said to myself: That has to stay fresh. That's where the transformation began.

AL: What do you mean when you say transformation?

Charlotte Lichtblau: That a flower depicted realistically with paint applied to a flat surface is already an interpretation. Even if it's done with great exactitude like a botanical drawing, you recognize the style of the times, the style of a personality. It's almost the same with a photograph: you know who made it and, above all, when, at which point in time and in which style it was made, although the photographer probably never thought about that. The transformation happens.

The format of origin and transformation applies to the structure of a life, a person, an identity, and a work of art. You can't dispense with one or the other. The motivation for this is, I believe—to put it very simply—love. Without love, the process of transformation never gets underway. Without it, this desperate need this really difficult work cannot take shape. Love can also turn into hate, but basically this has to do with love and loss and with grasping, comprehending, and preserving. To this I can perhaps add that I totally identified with the older generation—that is, with my parents, with their loss, with my grandparents and, above all, with my grandmother whom I loved so very dearly. But I didn't know any of that—I see this today, now that I'm old and I look back on it.

AL: You say: to transform the form. What is form for you?

Charlotte Lichtblau: I couldn't possibly answer that question. It is, first and foremost—although nowadays no one believes in this anymore—the unity of the painting, the overall form of the design, so that the image becomes a unitary whole. In German, one would say: *aus einem Holz geschnitzt* (carved from a single block of wood). Although it is indeed frequently done, you cannot combine styles—for instance, surrealism with impressionism. A work must contain a complete thought or a fundamental form. This yields a certain analogy to truth. The truth is recognizable by its unity. It's like when you look at something and realize instantaneously: yes! But not even Plato could really define what form is. Nevertheless, one knows what “un-form” is. Art is when form assumes a physical shape. The content is transformed—that is, the narrative element is blended into it and it is endowed with a mental form, although, in art of course, this is a highly material process.

AL: If I understand you correctly, you're saying that, so to speak, in a working process, form becomes stronger than the original narrative structure?

Charlotte Lichtblau: Yes. When I'm working, it doesn't matter at all to me whether it's on a religious image or an Aussee landscape or a still life—I forget what it is in order to paint it. It becomes something totally different. And this is also the exciting and the distinctive element in painting that it is precisely through this process that I recognize what I had not been aware

of previously. In other words: I begin with a theme, work on it, and it ends up giving something back to me that I had had no idea about before, and this occurs through the emergence of a form. That is actually the transformation. And nevertheless, when this succeeds, none of the narrative elements are lost; quite the contrary, it materializes and coalesces, and really assumes a form.

AL: Let's talk about expressionism. After all, you describe yourself as an expressionist.

Charlotte Lichtblau: Grudgingly, but that's what I was labeled. I believe that expressionism is positively ancient; it isn't just a product of the Modern Age. Consider, for example, very early Byzantine painting—the hand of the mother of God that holds the child is three times as large as the other hand. It wasn't painted anatomically wrong; the aim was to visually portray the significance of the content in this way, with colors as well as in its form. I believe that it was no coincidence that people like Kasimir Severinovich Malevich, the early Russian expressionists, emerged from the tradition of iconography. I have a very strong affinity for early 20th-century expressionism—that was a fantastic time of liberation. Oskar Kokoschka is one of my all-time greats. I love Kokoschka because he really believed—as I still believe to this day—that, when someone sees, he can change and improve the world.

When it's *gemütlich* inside, it's *ungemütlich* outside.

Childhood in Aussee

AL: Why have you dealt so intensively with Aussee as the theme of works you've produced here in America? For example, you depict festivals you experienced as a child.

Charlotte Lichtblau: The point of this was reconstruction. By reconstructing it, I also transplanted it—and thus, the process of transformation comes into play once again. One ought not get too wrapped up in verbalizing this, because that brings in the utter horror of the story—for instance, the very festively lit boats and all possible shapes and forms. This is something frightening, just like the lake is also frightening.

AL: Are you saying that your experience during the Nazi years left an impression on your view of these past events?

Charlotte Lichtblau: This impression had already been made, but it was very definitely transformed by all the people who aren't around anymore, those we have lost. Even as a child, I sensed the element of eeriness amidst all the harmony. When it's *gemütlich* inside, it's *ungemütlich* outside. This even has to do with the word *gemütlichkeit*, it has to do with the language. What I observed as a child in Altaussee never made me happy in spite of how much I adored it. It hurt.

AL: Because it was a threat or because you didn't belong to it?

Charlotte Lichtblau: I didn't want to belong to it. I can't really say that because I can't put myself back into the frame of mind of my childhood. I just know that I saw something that didn't add up. It's impossible for me to interpret this in words. The original autochthonous state—the way things might have previously been—had long since disappeared, even in my childhood. And that which was played out there was already multi-layered and complex. It was very sexual, it was highly erotic, but at the same time it was quite phony. Things didn't blend together well. It displeased me aesthetically. I had the feeling it wasn't right.

AL: I imagine it was like this: There was a traditional Aussee culture, and then along came the city folks. And the original culture became staged to a greater and greater extent—all of this can be observed. One's own heritage became estranged, so to speak. And the strangers didn't blend in with the locals either.

Charlotte Lichtblau: That's how it was. It pained me terribly that the owners of the house had to move to some austere quarters out back in order to be able to rent us the beautiful house at the front of the property for cash. As a child, I spent as much time as possible in the back because this really hurt my feelings. But at the same time I truly loved all of this. I didn't understand why we had to return to Vienna, or I didn't want to accept it. Long before Hitler, I

was completely distraught every time it came to leaving Aussee because I wanted to stay there.

AL: If this was so painful for you as a child, is leaving Aussee even more painful for you now that you're living in New York?

Charlotte Lichtblau: O God, the departure is terrible. When we cross the Pötschen Pass, I tell the driver to tune in a rock-'n'-roll station and not to look at me. It's terrible, horrible. But you can't do anything about it. On the other hand, I go to Aussee more often than I go to Brooklyn!

AL: When you were a child, did your family travel to Altaussee every summer?

Charlotte Lichtblau: Not only every summer but for Christmas and Easter too. During my entire childhood, there was only one time that we couldn't go there. We went to Yugoslavia because my sister had some sort of problem with her lungs, so we had to spend three weeks at the seashore. And I was miserable because I wanted to be in Aussee.

AL: Did you travel there by train?

Charlotte Lichtblau: Yes. And that was a whole big production, amazing. It's still the same boring stretch until you reach Linz, until you start to get into the mountains. We traveled with gigantic baskets full of linens and so forth, everything to completely outfit a household, as well as two maids. Two families together—there were maids and a housekeeper, and everything else we needed. Of course, I have to mention that the men didn't stay there for the whole three months. After all, they had to work, so they went back to Vienna. My grandfather and my father only came on the weekends or during their vacation for a couple of weeks. They didn't stay for three months like we did.

AL: Who was the second family?

Charlotte Lichtblau: My grandparents. Then there were my parents and my sister and I. Sometimes another child would be brought along, maybe the child of the washerwoman or

someone, for company. And this was also good for the washerwoman, who couldn't afford to send her kid away on a summer vacation. This was a whole extended family, the likes of which one can hardly imagine today. Sometimes, there were 20 at the dinner table.

AL: Where exactly did you live in Aussee? Was it always in the same house?

Charlotte Lichtblau: In different houses. In the beginning, when my parents were not yet that well-off, we lived together with my grandparents in one house. And later, when my father was doing a bit better, we rented our own house.

AL: Was there a particular family there that was especially important for you at that time?

Charlotte Lichtblau: Well, for instance, there were the Angerers. She's dead, he died of blood poisoning at a very young age, and their child, little Annerl, was killed by an avalanche. That was a very simple house—two stories and two verandas, one upstairs and one downstairs, two kitchens, a peasant-style kitchen and the one that was rented to us, and the bedrooms upstairs. My grandmother had the toilet installed. We children spent a lot of time together with the homeowners and talked to them a lot. This also had to do with the fact that the maids got along very well with the Aussee natives. Two of our maids live in Aussee. One of them, Laura, married a man from there; the other was my favorite—Mizzi, a real old-fashioned Viennese woman, a fantastic person.

AL: You mentioned that you were the third generation in Altaussee; that means that your grandmother, Lilli Ehrmann, was the first to vacation there?

Charlotte Lichtblau: I believe that even her mother used to go there. It was around 1890 when it started. My grandmother Lilli was very unconventional. She was not at all a *grande dame*. She was a real character, one of a kind. She had a very strong attachment to the Aussee landscape and to the people who lived there—not only to the summer guests but to the locals as well. I really loved her, and she loved Altaussee; I surely got that from her. In Aussee, she was at home. And she was totally uninhibited. I mean, she stood out on the street in her underwear, [laughs] whatever popped into her head. She didn't stand on ceremony or follow

any sort of rules of etiquette. At her house, you would never know how many people would be at the table or if she would just suddenly get up and leave. She was simply a very high-spirited person, but definitely very smart, and she had a very close relationship with me and with my daughter Claudia.

There was one incident that I experienced. My grandmother more or less abducted a girl named Annerl, the child of a peasant farmer. She had polio and was crippled, and my grandmother took her to Vienna to be operated on. It was a scandal, the farmer was really furious. But everything turned out alright in the end—afterwards, Annerl was able to walk a little bit, and later she became the owner of a swimming school on Lake Sommersberg.

AL: Aside from the natural beauty, which is really spectacular, do you think that the longing to be rooted to the soil like the indigenous population played a role among the Viennese summer guests who undertook this strenuous journey back then?

Charlotte Lichtblau: Yes, of course, very definitely. It's very subjective, the way I explain it to myself. My parents' and grandparents' circle of friends were mostly assimilated Jews and a couple of non-Jews. I suppose that the love of nature and simple peasant life, the romantic feeling of being close to nature and so forth were an ersatz-religion to a certain extent.

I saw ghosts, real ghosts.

Return

AL: In 1937, you were in Altaussee for the last time before you fled. You dealt very intensively with Austria in the work you did in America. And this includes paintings of Aussee scenes, which are part of the core of your work. How do you account for that?

Charlotte Lichtblau: I guess that I learned to see in Aussee, which means that the forms of these structures, of these mountains, are an integral part of my formal language. Even when I'm not painting Aussee, the forms are still the same. I've painted *Trisselwand* at least a hundred times, both from life and from memory. That's a very complex mountain. *Trisselwand* is

almost a cubist affair, and it changes under different lighting conditions. The fact is that one sees shapes, figures, etc. within it; the mountain is very figural. And besides the forms, there are faces inside it—that's the only way I know how to put it. That's a matter of aesthetics for my work. For me, the mountains are personalities, personifications. They're persons. It's like a dialog. I'm not interested in mountains in general, but these mountains speak to me in a very special way. Each of these mountains is a personality. One is masculine; one is feminine; one is this and that. This still comes from the way of looking at things that I had as a child in which everything comes to life and becomes a character.

AL: In America, you had already started painting scenes from Aussee even before you were able to return. What was important about this for you?

Charlotte Lichtblau: I suppose that this is all very primitive, just like animals marking their territory. I don't want to dramatize it. People always talk about this too much. It's really very primitive, and I wanted to fully understand it.

AL: Did your understanding then change when you returned?

Charlotte Lichtblau: No, the place changed. This is terribly interesting—after all, a child believes that what she experiences is forever and always. But the world changes. For me, Altaussee was a holy place; now it's become a secular place. That's not totally true, since I still get all excited when I arrive there.

From an artistic perspective, the point is to avoid generalizations, and what is so important to me there—to the extent that it still exists—is that which is specific. One can generalize everything, and art lies somewhere in between. It must be universal, but it also has to be specific, and that is a very, very specific, concrete place that really exists. That's the way it is. It was my tough luck to have been in Aussee as a child, and that's why I can't really come to terms with the rest of the world.

AL: You mentioned before that you've painted *Trisselwand* over and over again. Can you give me an example of this fascination?

Charlotte Lichtblau: For example, there's a painting entitled "*Auferstehung*" (Resurrection).

There's a hole in the *Trisselwand*, and we were told that the devil lives in this hole. And he lives there too. And he also comes out, and you can see this hole very clearly. I painted it in some pictures. It was a deep cave. And on midsummer's night, people risked their lives to set a fire below this cave.

AL: Did these specters and the devil really exist for you then? Were they real for you as a child?

Charlotte Lichtblau: I have a problem with the word real because, for me, everything is real. The Aussee landscape is infused with legends, the myths and the superstition, and with the mixture of heathen beliefs and the adoration of saints. This is figurative transformation and personification. In many respects, this is like voodoo, anthropomorphized to the last detail.

AL: Your work very frequently has to do with customs and traditions, and at the same time with loss. Now, in your life, is this experience during the Nazi era ...

Charlotte Lichtblau: Forgive me for interrupting you, but I believe that it had begun even earlier, that there were always sacrifices. The history of sacrifice goes back to the dawn of mankind. Especially in heathen religions, there is always sacrifice. Hermann Broch, whose work I read only much later, also dealt with this theme in his novel set in the mountains. The Nazis didn't need this to come upon the theme of sacrifice, although the Nazis truly consummated it. But the idea of sacrifice—bloody or otherwise—has always existed. Incidentally, I really have a lot of respect for Hermann Nitsch. I can really relate to his work, although he is somewhat more extreme than I am. He shows what is inherent in religion, but not without knowledge and not without reverence. He deals with a theme with which I am very familiar, though he makes it more dramatic and more unappetizing, I must say.

AL: Was the aspect of these customs that was threatening for you the fact that they always entailed a victim?

Charlotte Lichtblau: Yes, certainly. This was always a matter of the weaker ones; it was always so that someone didn't go along, you didn't have to go right to the gas chamber. The brutality

begins much earlier. Naturally, one sees that in retrospect from a different point of view, that's very clear.

A small fragment of my biography: When Hans [John Lichtblau] was serving in the U.S. occupation force, I joined him in 1946 in bombed-out Germany. The first thing we did there was to go walking in the forest. I was so afraid, I strapped on Hans' holster and pistol. And at this time in Germany, in the Fichtel Mountains, I saw ghosts, real ghosts. I had a nervous breakdown and had to be hospitalized. It was just a crazy idea, but not without its reason. After the doctors then told me that everything was clinically in order, I pulled myself together and went home. At the same time, I saw the adversity, the terrible adversity. But that wasn't the start of it. You feel it when children go at it with one another.

AL: What do you mean when you speak of the German forest?

Charlotte Lichtblau: The German forest is certainly a familiar concept in Romanticism and in literature. I don't know if you're familiar with American forests, but that's more or less primeval forest. You can't walk through it. To walk through an evergreen forest is a childhood experience of mine. The fairy tales emerge, all the ghosts come out—it's full of the past, culturally as well as visually. The trees stand in formation like soldiers. After the war, that was the case to an even greater extent because people were gathering the undergrowth for heating and cooking. All the émigrés longed for a German forest—no, not German but a European forest, which exists in the Austrian as well as the German landscape. Even from the plane, on the final approach, you can see geometric structures and a small group of trees here and there; that's all fully civilized. And when I arrived there back then and saw the forest together with the bombed-out cities and the miserably poor people, of course it was terrible. I was also very afraid. They were all still there. I was really scared. When I arrived, we lived in some Nazi big shot's house that had been commandeered by the army. And I thought to myself: Why doesn't the cook poison us, why is he so nice and friendly?

I hope to give something back.

The Exhibition

AL: Later, you repeatedly returned to Altaussee. Is Aussee a homeland for you?

Charlotte Lichtblau: That's become a difficult word—homeland. Yes, if you take it in a very primitive sense, yes.

AL: Do you often dream about it?

Charlotte Lichtblau: If I don't dream of Aussee at least once a week, something's wrong with me. But less and less lately. I guess that changes as you get older—then there's no more homeland, not even your own body. It's simply different, at least in my life.

AL: Your statement that you wanted to mark the place is a very powerful image for me. I suppose we do that with history as well. I wanted to ask whether this marking process had subsided and been overlaid by something else.

Charlotte Lichtblau: That's no longer possible for me now. I don't have to mark it anymore because I can look back on my work. I really have to laugh about the quantity of my Aussee paintings. But I travel there because it makes me happy. My storeroom is full, although my pictures of Aussee are very much in demand. Just last week I sold another *Trisselwand*. It really is something that appeals to people.

AL: What are your expectations from the exhibition in Altaussee?

Charlotte Lichtblau: I hope to give something back and I hope to be able to say something with it to the people there today about what they actually have before them in this place.

If, despite having been driven out of Austria, Charlotte Lichtblau has been able to maintain a positive attitude toward her former homeland, then this is the result of her concrete positive human experiences at the beginning of the Nazi era—for example, with Mizzi, the former domestic servant who had already left the family's employ and was living on her own when the

Nazis took power. After the *Anschluss*, Mizzi took it upon herself to return to the Adelbergs in order to look after the children and enable the parents to go about gathering all the official documents necessary for them to flee the Third Reich.

Another formative experience was her friendship with Susanna, the girl who sat next to her in class at the Schwarzwald School. Charlotte had gone through thick and thin with her. Susanna proved to be immune to the creeping Nazi terror and remained loyal to her friend. An episode that occurred immediately after the *Anschluss* is depicted by author Susanna Germano in her excellent, recently published biographical novel:

“A day later, right in the middle of English class with the dim-witted but Aryan Miss Koschat, a tall blond girl from the 8th grade came into the classroom. After some whispered words with Koschat, she announced: My name is Nelly Peller and I represent the *Bund Deutscher Mädel* [Nazi girls’ association] at this school. From now on, all Aryan children must sit apart from the Jews. Whoever is Aryan: raise your hands. The idiotic Gretl, Trudi and Hilde raised their hands. Peller pointed to two benches in the front row. You will sit together here, and the present occupants will take your places. The children switched seats. This Peller had a big tin swastika pinned to her white blouse. From now on, all Aryan children must wear a swastika badge like this one so there’s no mistaking who they are, the stupid cow said. Just a moment, you’re not Jewish either, Koschat said, and pointed to me. No, but I refuse to be separated from Lotte. And why not? Peller asked. I’m Mohammedan. *Allah akbar*. God is great. Peller stared at me. The other children giggled as she stormed out. Then Koschat said: I’m afraid that will have unpleasant consequences.”

(Susanna Germano, *Faust I und die Tante Helene. Roman einer Kindheit*, Vienna: Mandelbaum Press 1999, pp. 238 f.)