

Enlightenment

Stephen Brandes always subverts earnestness with the sardonic, mordant and mischievous wit that permeates all of his work, writes **Francis Halsall**

Stephen Brandes calls himself ‘an awkward, rootless cosmopolitan’ – and this nicely describes his art too. His work employs counterfactual narratives, histories and geographies to create stories and places that, whilst seeming initially familiar, fox any attempt to take them too literally. The forthcoming exhibition at the Centre Culturel Irlandais, Paris might just feature his most ambitious work yet.

The centrepiece of the show is *La Place des Grands Abysses*, a new hour-long film that revisits many of the themes, styles and techniques that have pre-occupied the artist for the last decade. The film combines photography, drawing, collage and text within the format of an animated slide show. Alongside this are Brandes’ characteristic monumental and highly detailed drawings. The whole body of work is a playful, absurd, offbeat and at times melancholy meditation on memory, what it might mean to be a European and the tarnished legacy of the Enlightenment.

Albert Sitzfleisch initially appears to be the central character of the story. He is a career administrator and enthusiastic traveller, who we meet in late middle age and at the very end of his seemingly unremarkable life. The story joins him just as he has been made redundant from the ‘Council of Europe’ and we follow him on his journeys between Kinsale in Ireland to Athens and Paris. Along the way, he tries to write a book on optimism, attempts to seek gainful employment, visits restaurants and monuments, and then dies in a way that is as modest and unspectacular as his life. As the story draws to a close, Sitzfleisch returns as a somewhat obstreperous ghost to squabble with the artist about meddling in his affairs.

Other characters appear: Rousseau

and Voltaire turn up as bickering ghosts; there’s a disgruntled diner at a comically appalling Athenian restaurant; as well as a supporting cast of historical figures, statues and rioting Parisians.

Throughout all of this, it becomes clear that, alongside Sitzfleisch, the other central character is Europe itself. The work becomes a reflection of the idea of Europe as a set of shared values and experiences. At one point, Sitzfleisch is asked if he is English and he replies ‘hesitantly’ that he is European and his experiences seem to bear witness to a sense of Europe that has become uncertain. Perhaps it might have only existed in memory and myth.

Brandes’ techniques of collage and the juxtaposition of diverse imagery with his fictional, fragmentary and fanciful narrative capture the sense that any fixed ideas of European identity might be patchy or illusory.

The story is set in 2069. Brandes explains that setting things in the not-too-distant future gives him a freedom to reflect on the conditions of the present without going into specifics. In 2069, institutions are failing, monuments to the past are becoming defunct and rioting crowds are toppling statues. This really doesn’t feel all that different from today.

At this future time, the spectre of nationalism is looming and the ‘Council of Europe’, of which Sitzfleisch is the representative, has become untenable. The old institutions and bureaucracies seem to be sclerotic, dysfunctional and ‘barely breathing’. As he explains at the very end of the film, Sitzfleisch serves as a kind of tour guide for the ruins of a civilization and way of life that has gone to seed. During the film, it is explained that the film itself is ‘an allegorical portrait of what may yet come’.

Brandes insists that Sitzfleisch is not a self-portrait, yet perhaps there is something of himself in his creation. Brandes is also a white European man of a certain age who is somewhat displaced with a family that is rich in history. He is English with Jewish ancestry, but now lives in the West of Ireland, having moved there (via Dublin) several decades ago from the West Midlands in England.

In addition to his studio-based practice, Brandes is also an



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accomplished cook and gourmet. In this regard, the notion of *terroir* particularly interests him; that is the profound connection between a landscape and the produce associated with it such as wine, whiskey or cheese. Perhaps this concept applies also to *La Place des Grands Abysses* (literally, the place of the great hole) which is the *terroir* for a faded and decrepit culture. The title takes its name from the Marxist philosopher Georg Lukács who, in a text from 1933, as Brandes says, ‘excoriated the European left for meeting the rising tide of fascism with decadent resignation’.

Brandes explains: ‘I’m not attempting to give a sense of disillusionment with the *haute* culture of European civilization, but am rather actually sad, or “decadently resigned”, to the fact that the ideal of a consolidated and cooperative

Europe might be a hopeless case – and this is reiterated by the notion that the foundation stones of modern European enlightenment were all deeply flawed characters.’

This talk of disillusionment or sadness might make this all sound quite serious – and in some ways, it evidently is – but Brandes always subverts earnestness with the sardonic, mordant and mischievous wit that permeates all of his work. Circumnavigating the abyss at the heart of the ruined *terroir* is Sitzfleisch, the English European whose name is unmistakably German (it literally means the meat you sit on or buttocks). The peripatetic bureaucrat, hesitant European and protagonist of the work is, in other words, a bit of an arse. ■

Stephen Brandes, *La Place des Grands Abysses*, Centre Culturel Irlandais, Paris, 19 September – 31 October

Francis Halsall lectures in visual culture at NCAD, Dublin.

1 STEPHEN BRANDES
(F) PEDEION ATHENS
2019 analogue and
digital collage scaled
for large format print
on hemmed banner,
mirror-screws,
145 x 90cm

2 *LA PLACE DES
GRANDS ABYSSES*
2018-19 permanent
marker, biro and
acrylic on lino
212 x 271cm

