

*The Squirrels, Hedgehogs, and Rabbits are Indeed Harmless*

Andrea Loeffke

Michael Steinberg Gallery

New York

Waldgefühl

Although German-born artist Andrea Loeffke doesn't recognize the word *Waldgefühl* (forest feeling or sentiment), I have it on reasonable authority that it is part of German traditional culture and vocabulary. One encounters the notion in nineteenth century paintings that reference nature, for instance; one prominent example, among many others, being the work of Caspar David Friedrich.

Both concept and word have symbolic value that resonates with thinking during Friedrich's time — Romanticizing of greater nature along with fondness for imagined, subjective mysteries of deep, dark places — as well as political and practical ramifications for our own. With respect to this latter, environmental and ecological considerations come immediately to mind. Pretty much everything in Loeffke's recent, large-scale installation at the Michael Steinberg Gallery in New York was green; bilious, toxic green and not forest green, for sure, but green nonetheless. After all, this is the beginning of the twenty-first century and green seems almost to be the official color of our time. Loeffke's shade of green, however, was chosen to convey some of her various, not quite in your face messages. What was her installation about? What did she intend? A number of things, both complex and subtle.

Even though the show's title, "The Squirrels, Hedgehogs, and Rabbits are Indeed Harmless," was more than a hint at the artist's interest in, and intimate concern for, nature, there was more to it than that. The distance between her viewers and things to be seen was considerable, both metaphorically and in fact. What one first noticed in the sizable room was its seeming emptiness. Certainly, there was an eight-foot ladder smack in the middle and a variety of things placed here and there; but much of what was to be looked at was low down on the walls and spaced out on the floor, most noticeably around the baseboards. The objects ranged in size from small to tiny and my first look around was spent largely on hands and knees.

But the ladder: What was that all about? It was topped off by a small platform with a cozy cushion and pair of binoculars that suggested another possibility beyond hands and knees for checking things out; namely, viewing from afar. Of course, by just wandering around the space in the usual way, one saw what was there, but since things were mostly in nether positions and small, one's relation to them was primarily from above looking down. It was clearly possible with the binoculars, however, to dip into the world below in special ways, just as the ladder offered onlookers a particular view of the overall scene with unaided eyes. Because things were so carefully set up in this way, questioning of vantage point was clearly one of Loeffke's goals.

Right away, things became complex. The Rothko/Newman idea that intimacy infers large scale, not small, came to mind. Yes, Loeffke's objects were on the small side, on the one hand, but she provided binoculars, on the other; and to use them, one needed to

distance oneself from what was to be viewed by climbing the ladder. From that vantage point, one zoomed in on things down below and the resulting distance suggested objective observation rather than more personal, direct contact. It also restricted the possibility of seeing the whole landscape at a glance. One saw, instead, its details and constituent parts; the trees, so to speak, not the forest.

In the midst of forests, German forests in particular, deer hunters stalk their prey sometimes on the prowl, but more often by hiding in deer stands: elevated shelters from which they can survey their surroundings while at the same time be out of sight of their intended targets and, in a sense, distance themselves from the intended slaughter. Hence the ladder as metaphorical deerstand as well as a place for possible rest and contemplation. And there were targets also to be seen in the room, abstracted and much smaller than real ones, but one easily got the point.

Forests and cute animals suggest all sorts of romantic notions: fairy tales, fabulous enchantment, and again, dark mysteries of nature among them. But fairy tales don't always have happy endings and Loeffke's work was tinged by strangeness and unease. Within her pastoral landscape there were hints of violence. Mini, green poles held up a sort of clothes line that had hanging on it a magazine cut out showing a frog's skin, close up implying some sort of recent horrible thing. Bits and pieces of truncated and deformed animals were to be spotted as well. Many of the small trees — ones easily identifiable, others abstractions — were surrounded by dead leaves suggesting nature's possible ills. At various places, the walls were pocked with bullet holes indicating the presence of hidden hunters. So, maybe *Waldgefühl* has a sinister side as well as one of childhood fantasy. Maybe nature is not always as joyful as one might expect. After a while, that creepy shade of green began to speak to me of innocence lost, a sense of discomfort began to color my experience of being a participant in Loeffke's subtle work.

Scattered among her three-dimensional objects were brief texts. One was painted, green on green, directly on the wall, others written on slips of paper pasted here and there while still others dangled from hooks. Some, along with diverse drawings relating to the overall themes of the installation, crept up in size and were framed; the general tinyness was briefly allowed to expand. But, once again, since much of what was there to be seen was small, especially from the vantage point of the ladder, the binoculars came in handy. One such text read, "Here the air is like wine and the sweet, delicious sunshine covers the ground. The lust of the hunt, the fierce desire to find and kill disappears." So, there were verbal commentary and hints as well as visual cues to guide the viewer. There was also this reminder that what the sun abated would surely reappear once the light had gone. It was only a temporary respite.

Loeffke used a great variety of materials in this installation and there was always something fresh to be discovered among her large number of objects. A miniature ladder leaning against the wall rhymed with a tiny fragment of picket fence nearby, also, of course, with the large ladder nearby. Smallish green "stones" covered with stretched paper were carefully situated, Mini trees such as one sees in architects' models stuck out from the wall. Things looking vaguely like hefty chestnuts made out of egg carton fragments and spray foam were suspended from the ceiling at and below eye level. Twigs, paper, plastic, Styrofoam, fabric, yard, mini blackboards, and photos were among

the rewards of my search. Band-Aids here and there offered hints and speaking balloons such as one finds in comic strips suggested messages of one sort or another. The list could go on.

Andrea Loefke's installation provided all manner of things to view and think about. The work's greatest quality may have that it gave its viewers a chance actually to be part of it so that they might check out a large number of objects of all sorts, move about in its space both laterally and vertically, contemplate it both close up and from a distance, and, finally, figure out for themselves what the entire experience might add up to and meant. I wasn't at all told what to think; rather, simply to do so. I wasn't just an onlooker. In a certain respect, I completed the piece just by being there, and had others been present as well while I was, they might, in fact, have seen me as part of the show just as I would have seen them. I would have been one of the few things there that was not that weird shade of far-from forest green, however. On my hands and knees, I would have been engaged in the details of the work as well as its overall challenge: forest, danger, quiet, engagement, provocation, distance, intimacy, thoughtfulness, and — oh my God! — that twenty-first century color, the result of our being part of this world , now, as well as part of its problems.

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