

# Chantal Michel

## Honey, Milk, and First Violets (2010)

### Videoinstallation, color, sound, 1:30' loop

May 7 until September 5, 2010

The performance and media artist Chantal Michel (b. 1968 in Bern) comprehends the video installation she created especially for the Kunstmuseum Bern as a "contemporary dream in Albert Anker's world of imagery". The installation comprises six projections of forty different video sequences in total. They last only several minutes, but nevertheless contain the complete life-cycle from birth (baby), then marriage (bride with a veil) through to death (skull). Additionally they show the various spheres of life such as education (book), art (a hand that writes with a pen), daily routine (bread, milk, eggs, sugar, and animals), the supernatural, as well as play (cards, dice, soap bubbles). The total length of the sequences is one-and-a-half hours, and, while the sequence order of the films remains the same, every playback commences at a different point in the projections, so that the installation space conveys the appearance of a walk-in cabinet in which changing life-size visualizations of pictorial ideas are presented.

Numerous motifs can be clearly allocated to Albert Anker's (1831–1910) world of imagery: a woman knitting, someone blowing bubbles, an open book, and even a brown and white rooster or dominos. This is not surprising considering that the artist borrowed certain objects from the painter's former studio in Ins. Nevertheless, all the videos are based on free adaptations of Anker's work; the ambience of his paintings is a trigger for Chantal, but to a much greater degree she has a penchant for similar things. Like Anker, for example, she collects fabrics. Both own a large stock of clothing and place great value on carefully setting a scene with textile surfaces and palpably real details. In her intensive response to Anker's work, Chantal Michel also transposes several of his compositional principles into the medium of video. Following his models, she positions figures – that is, herself – in the center of the frame either frontal, in profile, or three-quarter profile. She presents herself in the image either fully or as a bust from the hips upwards. The most pronounced means of presentation shared by both artists is a black background that imbues the figures and objects with immense plasticity. Anker's subdued coloration was determined by real-life situations and the availability of light, whereas Chantal Michel consciously reduces her means of producing imagery and displays herself in countless shades against a velvety dark background, thereby letting the subtle nuances have their full effect. In contrast to the painter who chose a single moment and froze it in the medium of paint for eternity, the media artist transmutes the represented event into a moving one. However, she works with a video filter that records single video shots as positive afterimages while the action continues in real time. Chantal Michel utilizes this style of shooting videos to give her scenes a dreamlike appearance or invoke the impression of remembered sequences. The background music is a determining factor for the ambience – not forgetting the sets and costumes, the coloration, and the projection of videos in a black painted room. Michel fragments short melodies or even plays them backwards. This form of alienation briefly transforms the tranquil scenes, making them evoke the unfathomable, and also signalizes knowledge of the fragility of an "intact world", apprehending the dark side of the rural and middle-class idyll.

Chantal Michel's focus on this leading Swiss artist is in no way backward-looking as far as content is concerned. She suppresses the innate hierarchy of female virtues in Anker's representations by imitating the gestures and bodily movements in a gender-neutral way and by focusing on their aesthetic function alone. While she definitely does not identify with the late 19<sup>th</sup>-century image of women, she certainly does not criticize it either. Instead she relishes the opportunity of being able to freely embody scenes we find in Anker's works without any age-restrictions and without gender-specific dictates. She can slip into the role of a model or into that of the artist as she wishes. She alone is responsible: she directs and films the videos herself while she composes the intricate choreography and determines the sequence, the accompanying music, and the type of presentation. Images on the monitor, which Chantal Michel consults like a mirror while filming, are fed back to the video camera, creating a theater-like situation even without an audience. Her experience in classical dance and as a performance artist enhances the presentation. The artist must repeat the sequences in full until she has a version that she is happy with because she neither cuts her video films nor pauses during filming. She must continually concentrate on what she is doing as if she were dancing on the stage. This makes her actions seem infused with a hypnotic presence.

In the multi-part video installation, Chantal Michel revives the tradition of the "tableau vivant" in which paintings are staged by actors in the poses of the figures. As in the theatre, the emphasis varies from interpretation to interpretation, and the result is strongly dependent on the spectator's art-historical knowledge to recognize the different allusions. Nevertheless, Chantal Michel does not take up the "tableau vivant" just in order to imitate famous artworks. In her form of presentation a view becomes palpable in which the present is strongly embedded in the past. The new is constructed from layers of historical works without letting them disappear from memory altogether.

#### Catalogue

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#### Guided tours (as part of the Albert Anker tour)

Tuesdays 7 p.m. and Sundays 11 a.m.

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