

## **Fremdschmerz**

by Katharina Hegewisch-von Perfall

At first glance, Helena Petersen's "Pyrography", developed since 2011, seem to have little in common with her earlier series. The series of images from "Ghost town" (2009) show sealed and boarded-up houses in an unspecified location. The lighting is magical, the streets are deserted. Why the place was left remains unexplained. The portrait diptychs of the "Free Fighters" series (2009) also leave a lot to the imagination. They are based on the classic principle of before and after. In front of a lit, completely neutral background, tough men look straight into the camera, taken before the fight - and after the fight. What happens in between, the aggression, the noises, the cheering audience, remains hidden.

The focus of Helena Petersen's work is on injuries, injuries of the intact, the body and the psyche. What powers are at work when the intact becomes fragile, the familiar questionable and the smooth rough? Why does one use force, why can one be hurt, why does one become a victim? Petersen says of herself that she feels the other person more intensely than most people. She calls it "Fremdschmerz" (stranger pain), which her pictures tell of in an increasingly abstract form. The Pyrographies renounce the anecdote of the individual fate. They expose the injury in the moment in which it occurs and with the violence to which it is owed.

How are the "Pyrographies" created? The location is a shooting range. Petersen works - just like the pioneers of photography - with the basic means of her medium, with light and light-sensitive paper. The Pyrographies are classical photograms. They can neither be multiplied nor digitally influenced. What they depict is as complex as it is irreversible, the result of teamwork that assigns tasks to each of the helpers involved and deposes Petersen of the final control.

The unexposed paper is brought to the shooting range in sealed containers, rolled out and fixated in total darkness and, after the shot - again carefully protected from the effects of external light - transported to the darkroom. The larger the paper, the more difficult it is to handle. Even with the most attentive handling, small cracks and wrinkles appear that affect the end result. An immediate intertwining of cause and effect is captured, an event that last no longer than a fraction of a second. The explosion of gunpowder at the moment a shot creates the image. Firing is done with live arm, the bright muzzle flash directly illuminates the paper. What becomes visible is not the ammunition, not the bullet aimed at the target, but the pure driving force. The images created, reveal amorphous, circular or elongated shapes, that fray towards the edges and are characterised by haptic burn injuries and powder traces. Each work is unique, as unpredictable as it is unrepeatably. Even if

the shooting conditions are absolutely identical, firing the same weapon at the same angle and distance across the paper will never produce the same image.

Similar to the psyche of a human being formed by its individual sensitivity to experiences, each light-sensitive paper reacts differently to the external influence. Until the shot is fired, the paper seems pure and virgin, after which it is forever drawn. Petersen's work has no moral goals. It exposes the moment that brings change. Whether for better or worse remains open.