



Bettina Carl, 'Ohne Titel/atraspe', 2001-2003, ca. 350 x 800cm. Exhibition view. Mixed media/paper, collage.

# BETTINA CARL

## STRUMMING FOR MARTYRDOM

*Bettina Carl is one of those artists who prove that making work about political issues or political history need not result in a dry and sombre experience.*

Almost all of Carl's work grows out of her interest in political histories of one form or another, probably a direct result of her fascination with the unfolding of momentous political events in her native Germany during her own early adulthood and her preceding attempts to engage with the world through the cultural context of a then divided state. Yet, when we experience the work of Bettina Carl, it is never a clinical, documentary affair. On the contrary, the installations, almost always consisting of a great many drawings on varied scales, perhaps with additional three-dimensional or sculptural elements, are usually affairs of fairly riotous colour and wild, sweeping lines.

Carl's work almost gives a sense of a Formalist post-punk take on Expressionism rather than a didactic lecture on politics; an experiential and sensuous kind of art to be largely felt rather than intellectually attended as one would a grave textbook on political history. But, both the political critique and intellectual component are not only present in her work, they are a defining part of her artistic process; a part of her life. This is certainly evident in other activities beyond those of making art.

She has, for example, worked as a curator in a number of contexts, most consistently - together with Ina Bierstedt and Alena Meier - in running the space 'Capri' in Berlin for a five-year period before moving to her present home of Zürich. 'Capri' remains one of the pertinent examples of the curatorial integrity that an artist-run space might have. It was situated on Berlin's Brunnenstrasse long before it had become the hip new spot for trendy young galleries. Indeed, together with a couple of other project spaces on the street, 'Capri' remains important in the early development of the street's current artsy chic. It is also reasonable to say that Carl, her two colleagues and a handful of fellow initiators were responsible for

making the previously run-down street blossom into a locale for contemporary art.

Furthermore, her practice has not been limited to that single space. Since completing post-graduate studies under Simon Sheikh and Gertrud Sandqvist - through the prestigious Critical Studies department at Malmö rather than in a practice-based discipline - Bettina Carl, in addition to making art, has undertaken various projects as a curator, writer and critic. The relevance of all of this is that it gives some notion of the level to which the intellectual reflection that informs her art work is intrinsically present. What remains fairly enigmatic about her practice is that, unlike various other artists who cross the lines of practice and theory, Carl's work has an instinctive freedom and manifestation that we do not usually associate with this combination of interests. It is, for example, not an illustration of a theoretical argument.

The organic way in which thought and artistic expression develop is well-illustrated by Carl's most recent series of works in which we find depictions, many of them with the humorous element characteristic of her work, of the protest singers that Carl recalls from her youth. A fixture in almost any German university town in the late 1980's, these bearded and sandal-wearing protesters sang songs against nuclear arms and Capitalism to anyone who would listen. Inevitably accompanied by an acoustic guitar and a desire to free the world of its militaristic stupidity, these once familiar faces have all but vanished - or at least substantially transformed - as life in Germany is no longer as it was.

Ever since Nena released her ninety-nine red balloons from the Berlin Wall, Germany simply no longer lives under the threat of imminent nuclear holocaust at the hands of its relatives living next door or the fear of their tanks making it - as they planned - to