

manzur kargar: faces, 2001

In his 2001 series *Faces* Manzur Kargar is showing a selection of large-format canvases, whose surfaces are almost completely taken up with women's faces. With this choice of subject the artist has stepped into one of painting's most conventional genres, the portrait. In contrast to traditional portraiture, however, and to conventions valid since the Renaissance, these faces bear no individual traits. Kargar is not interested in capturing the essence of a person. He uses contemporary iconography, taking the smooth complexions of high-tech models such as those seen on Benetton adverts and declaring them worthy of display through their transformation into paintings. Our everyday perception has long been influenced by the striking, flashy clichés of the glossy media. Stereotypical beauties symbolise consumer-happiness and general Zeitgeist. Through his selection of 21st century visual elements and their transposal from photography into his own painting, Kargar questions the perceptions and visual habits of our society.

Anyone still working in a traditional genre today has made a conscious decision against the video, internet or photographic art that illustrates a discourse on sociological or economic phenomena via contemporary media. Kargar, however, is concerned with the meaning of painting and takes photographic images as a starting point. Rather than consigning painting to obsolescence, advertising photography provides an inexhaustible supply of graphic material depicting a stylised reality. As such, it represents an instrument for examining the way our perceptions are influenced by aesthetic illusions. A painting which utilises contemporary advertising within its own traditional forms creates a necessary remove from poster-aesthetics, in which criticism and commentary are possible. By distancing himself from the subject matter through the use of a photo, Kargar provides a critique of reality.

In so doing, he concentrates in his works on archetypal aspects of painting - tone and form. Whilst the faces are vividly drawn and give the impression of spatial depth, they are interrupted by overlaid, symmetrically arranged, geometric blocks of colour. These colour blocks are opaque and appear flat in contrast to the realistically depicted faces. As a serial 'raster' similar to the minimalistic use of a grid structure, they serve to dissolve the painting's central point. A charge seems to oscillate between the two levels of the picture thus created. This has a misleading effect on the eye: in one

view a countenance of monumental proportions springs forth, in the other the geometrical elements keep it distant and unreachable. In this way the painted picture comments on the contradiction inherent in the hyperreal poster-aesthetic.

The beautiful faces in Kargar's paintings reflect advertising's method of producing ideal images against which the observer is supposed to measure him or herself. To this end criteria of the beauty of the human figure are adopted which go back to the Renaissance; harmony in proportion and symmetry in composition are considered prerequisites for an aesthetically pleasing representation. Kargar's painting shows that the innovations of the Italian Quattrocento have a validity that is taken to an extreme by advertising photography in the age of mass media. Transposed into the genre of the portrait this results in idealisation and abstraction - as in mediaeval Christian devotional art - rather than in the expression of individuality formulated by the portraitists of the Renaissance. Manzur Kargar's faces are therefore not in fact portraits, but pop icons of the Media Age - emotionless, typified and perfected.