



Death Sentence (The Charles Manson Girls) Courtesy of Galerie Urs Meile, Lucerne-Beijing

Programmed to deceive

Swiss artists Caroline Bachmann and Stefan Banz examine the way we look, writes **Stacey Duff**

Stefan Banz, who forms one half of the artistic duo 'Bachmann/Banz' is a Jack-of-all-trades. And he talks like one. Also a novelist and playwright, Mr Banz clearly enjoys discussing the many famous faces that adorn his and Bachmann's strange canvases – faces recognisable to anyone who grew up on a steady diet of TV and magazines.

The show comprises mostly of oil paintings that have a photo-realist edge, as if the artists were actually photojournalists. But weird things happen in these pictures – dictators lose their moustaches, great artists brandish pistols – and suddenly we're not sure we should trust what we see. Images that we might have posted on our bedroom walls in childhood – like the one of Kurt Cobain – mutate, and we start to rub our eyes.

'What Caroline [Bachmann] and I are trying to do here,' says Banz, 'is to get

people to think twice about what they see. So we alter the image or give the work a strange title to give a different meaning. We are mixing signals that should cause people to look at the original image in a new way.' Sometimes these 'mixed signals' are so subtle in fact that many viewers will not even recognise the original image that the doctored one is based on.

Der Schrei – a reference to Munch's famous 1893 painting, *The Scream* – features a grown man with his fists and elbows held-up in anger. Based on a photograph of Adolf Hitler, the authority of the demagogue is deflated since the artists have removed his moustache. A Rolling Stones logo (the famous tongue designed by Warhol) is also pinned ridiculously to his lapel. The screaming leader is made even more pathetic by a small chimpanzee that emulates him.

The title work in the show, entitled *Ting Bu Dong* (I don't understand), is also big on monkeys. Based on a film poster for the 1968 classic, *Planet of the Apes*, the painting depicts a tender final kiss between Taylor (played by Charlton Heston) and Zira, the film's heroine. The

work commands the attention of every eye in the room, not only because it shows a man locking lips with a monkey, but also because at almost 12 metres square, it evokes the magic of cinema. 'This works precisely because it is big like the movies,' says Banz. 'It is larger than life.'

'If you didn't know about the crimes, it's actually a fun picture,' he laughed'

Much of the work is satirical without turning malicious. A puzzling installation entitled *Narcissus*, which features a huge wooden film camera in a bed of water, stands squarely in the center of the space with all the gravity of a sacred totem. The camera faces down at the pool, filming itself as if it has become the object of its own affection. Hollywood, as this piece suggests, has fallen in love with itself, not unlike the boy in Ovid's classic tale.

Placed on gallery walls around the

Narcissus piece, there is also an amusing painting, slightly evocative of a *Mad Magazine* cover, based on the only known photograph of American novelist Thomas Pynchon. *Cucumber Lounge* captures the elegant Italian art critic Nataline Colonnello laughing with Chinese concept artist Ai Weiwei. In another room we visit the sniggling eyes of the Charles Manson girls. 'Just look at the girls,' Banz says of the Manson painting. 'I mean, if you didn't know about the crime, it's actually a fun picture!'

Puns to famous men and nods to pretty women. But if this work is ever upbeat, and often it is, Bachmann and Banz's pop-culture approach disguises a sour reality: not only can images entertain, but they can easily be doctored to deceive. The artists may be playing games, but they are games that caution us to look with care and to ask ourselves why we react the way we do. Sure – we could be the helpless victims of an evil propaganda, or just as likely, the unassuming martyrs of our own two eyes.

Bachmann/Banz: Ting Bu Dong is at Galerie Urs Meile. See listings for details.