

In the Irrealis Mood

The title of Clare Kenny's "If I was a rich girl" at the Kunst Raum Reichen has been a cause of discomfort amongst pedants (we used to call them "grammar nazis" but I've been told that it's not ok to *verharmlosen* in a bilingual publication). Some went out of their way to let her know that they thought the correct expression is "If I *were* a rich girl". For the record, "I" is not a plural, and although it may be useful to use "*were*" to indicate that the speaker is in the irrealis mood, a parallel universe in which they are rich, there is one fatal problem. "If I *were* a rich girl" may be more grammatically correct, but it is a *rich girl's way* to set up a counterfactual conditional, and only someone posh would use it.

From the look of the show, if Kenny was rich, her life would be pretty weird. But this requires no parallel universe, because her life is already pretty weird. Kenny is a funny artist, and she knows how to lean into a joke. The first level of this joke, which you need to know if you're not from Basel, and statistically if you are reading this you're probably not, is that the Kunst Raum Reichen is right next to the Fondation Beyeler, an institution that is famous for having lots of expensive stuff. It looks rather like it is part of it, a little gatekeepers lodge on the edge of the palace, but actually it's not, it's a small city owned gallery, that has somehow managed not to be absorbed by the cultural machine of the Beyeler, even as it ekes out an existence in its shadow, rather like a pilot fish swimming close to the mouth of a large shark.

Clare Kenny makes full use of this proximity, decking out the gallery like a palatial apartment. She paints the walls exactly the same pastel lavender that was popular in posh English houses (the kind that had collections of antique marble sculpture) in the early 19th century. She creates stucco cornices that are on close inspection much too large, but look pleasingly and theatrically pretentious in photographs, and she made endless ungainly pottery lamps that mutely, desperately attempt to imitate something horribly expensive from hard paste porcelain. What comes out is a kind of pantomime of grotesque wealth, but done in a tasteful way. This suits the city of Basel well, which also does a kind of artfully modest performance of having too much money, visible from the luxury watch fair that is held there every year, to the art fair, where the kinds of metrics that are used to predict success include a tally of the number of private jets flying in for the opening weekend.

The second level of the joke is this: In order to do this show at all, Clare Kenny had to go cap in hand to her better heeled friends to borrow works. All the artworks that she puts in her fantasy apartment are from private collectors. And her collector friends have expensive, I mean expressive taste: Louise Bourgeois, Imi Knoebel, and Wolfgang Tillmans. One of Basel's greatest children, the art historian Jacob Burckhardt, alluded to the affinity between art history and satire. The history of art, followed to its logical conclusion, is a history of the gap between how the rich and powerful wish to present themselves, and how they are perceived. It is the constant attempt to close this gap that keeps art dynamic (not any nonsense about avant gardes and their inherent restlessness). I hope this show makes her rich, so that she can continue to make art that trivialises money. She should sell the stucco by the metre. Please send expressions of interest to the editors. You'll find their contact details in the front of the magazine.

(erratum: not all of the works are from private collections, some were borrowed from the Fondation Beyeler, who musn't have realised what they were in for, and the Photomuseum Winterthur)