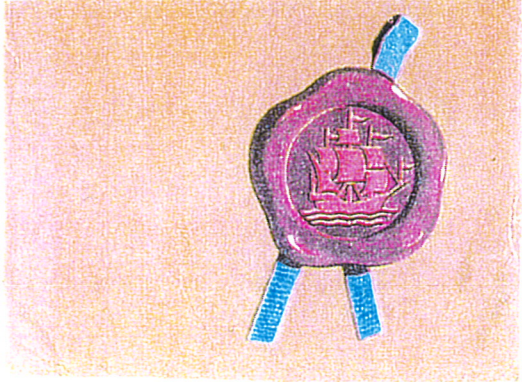


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Lukas Duwenhögger  
**Diplomatica**

*What if the right audience for this [spectacle] were exactly me? What if for instance, the resistant, oblique, tangential investments of attention and attraction that I am able to bring to this spectacle are actually uncannily responsive to the resistant, oblique, tangential investments of the person ... who created it? (EKS) <sup>i</sup>*

.....

*And in the closed little shop behind the heavy moucharaby now that they had all gone, the exhalations of the flowers arose; pungent, concerted odours, expressive of natural antipathies and feuds, suave alliances, suffering, pride and joy ... (Firbank) <sup>ii</sup>*

Diplomacy is the art of words as action. Diplomacy is also the art of detailed relations. Yes .. but *Diplomatica* ... really must be a little *Scherz*? My dear friend Lukas Duwenhögger seems hardly - how can I put this ... you know - the diplomatic type. His forceful fiercely gay output of works and writings do after all divide opinion, make complacency impossible, point out uncomfortable blind spots in the ruling intelligensia's vocabulary

and go against all kinds of non-exotic aesthetic grains. I suppose the need for diplomacy arises when dealing with conflicting powers and a potential battlefield. (Here in issue the veritable battlefield of sexual definition, gender, identity politics et al.) While gearing up, so to speak, to write this stubbornly English text, Lukas placed in my open hands (as he has - thankfully - many piquant texts before it) a volume of Ronald Firbank's novels with a mysterious cover. The first in the series entitled *The Flower beneath the foot*. The novel satirises the Court of an imaginary land whose principle business is diplomacy, fashion, literature, intricate social relations and the sexual relations that may and *may not* accompany them. I imagined the visual art sphere as just such a Court and some things began to make sense. But not to leap immediately out of anybody's already sizzling gourmet frying pan, I'd rather begin more obtusely.

You encounter a view which detains. Not one of the spectacular variety; not an obvious picture postcard contestant, no heroic ruins or urban monoliths. But, nevertheless and somehow perversely, a view in the centre of Rome. A modest scene: a huddle of buildings, a nursery; a row of white-washed glass houses, and half a dozen other miscellaneous practical economic structures. All around are elegant canopy pines and foliage cast in after midday light. A shadowy lavender road sweeps around the compound like a moat. A few white cars are parked by the entrance. Somewhere a water main has burst, or some other minor aquatic catastrophe has occurred and gone unnoticed. Rivulets of water trickle across the hot asphalt unchecked.

This pretty and evocative scene is the subject of one Lukas's two new paintings entitled *Roman Holiday* (1999). It took me aback at first. I have previously revelled (admittedly after a courting period of bashful uncertainty <sup>iii</sup>) in his palette (one

that reminds me of eating sorbet in a Victorian café in high Summer)

and his compositions of *inszenierte* predominantly desirable gazing male characters. With them in mind what, might this moody, vacant and subdued scene mean? Its pensive quality seems tangible considering the multitude of little precisely toned brush strokes, each a tender visitor to the canvas.

The resultant melancholy and reflective atmosphere seems to invite a metaphorical interpretation. For this there is prompting enough. A whitewashed glass house: a site of production and reproduction; here we are behind-the-scenes of many a public floral bed and avenue of trees. It brings with it connotations of a public life beyond, and by virtue of the whitewash ideas of protection, privacy and internal nurturing and some kind of intimacy shielded from pryers. In addition, a sense and sensibility for both open secrecy and secret openness. The activities in the house of cultivation are kept from us. Maybe its the development of new hybrids - bigger blooms with shocking colours and proportionately exaggerated names. (*Gilded Rose, Spanked Cheek, Ms Joy Explosion* - now I'm just guessing, getting carried away). Whatever the case, we know that the careful hands of the gardeners will be touching soil, the most exquisite form of getting dirty hands.

Then there is the surrounding semi-groomed but highly civilised Roman park. A little too let-off-the-leash to be a garden proper; it speaks of the natural and unnatural; an opposition and collusion between the artificial or constructed and the natural world. The later at times portrayed as threatening or even parasitically - the creeper finding root even on the hot glass roof. The binarisms suggested by *Roman Holiday* (i.e. artificial/natural, new/old, growth/decadence, urbane/provincial, art/kitsch, sincerity/sentimentality - to name some) are according to theorist, poet, editor Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick in

her book *The Epistemology of the Closet* (1990)<sup>v</sup> loaded in a specific way. She explains the link between these and *other pairings basic to modern cultural organisation* and what she calls the *permeative suffusing stain of the homo/heterosexual*<sup>v</sup> definition crisis.

But back to the painting. In *Roman Holiday* the painterly problem of representing foliage has been solved in an intentionally ambiguous fashion. Each tree diverse, its own species, some more sculptural than others, some more graphic or detailed than others. My favourites are the trees and bushes that have been metamorphosed into whipped-up green punkish or just-out-of-bed *Frisuren*. Gardens, like fashion are more closely related to social codes and structures than often appreciated. Think of the contrast between the flamboyant but highly organised displays of Victorian England's public gardens and the parched, lassitude of the Roman equivalent, and their corresponding reputations regarding social mores. In *The Flower beneath the foot* the palace garden and its grottoes provide a place of retreat, a private refuge and the possibility of physical intimacy - even though that activity may only led to broken hearts and retreat to monastic life<sup>vi</sup>.

Even a lazy viewer transforms the viewed. When that viewer is a painter that transformation, with the problem of representation as it axis, has material expression. There are many good reasons for an unhappy relationship with the *Herrschaft* of genre. Especially so when one sets out to represent something in paint on canvas. Confronted by this Lukas has often turned to a range of alternative visual resources like fashion photography, film, commercial illustrations and New Yorker comics to name some. One inspiration for *Roman Holiday*, for example, is a form of resorting to the bottle. No! - not just the contents, but as found on the more charming varieties - label illustrations; typically the place of production, a few vines, perhaps a glimpse of the surrounding landscape somewhat idealised - where necessary.

The second of the two paintings in the exhibition *Chéri* (1999)<sup>vi</sup> a portrait by the artist of a young man, is exuberance itself. The single almost life size male figure might be a new *catholic* saint - considering his festive elegance and communion with the Roman view opposite. But he is one who rejects the idea of his own original sin or martyrdom, and the patriarchal bureaucracy and the yearning for the sublime found in the official capital *C* religion. He's a Lahore-look model with a yellow banded straw *boater* tipped flirtatiously deep. Behind him there is an illusionist abstract space (of a type favoured in haute couture fashion photography) which has more to do with good theatre than with the now main stream pop-ish fascination of the *real* street. The former filled with colour, intention, plot and drama - anticipation. The painting's photographic cyc is a zebra crossing that becomes a kind of abstracted high rise as it travels up the wall. This motif is a nod in the direction of a series of fashion shots by Richard Avedon which show models crossing the black and white and smoking while on-lookers stand agape (smoking in public being for women then something shocking). The zebra crossing is here identified with something attractively urbane. Its graphic certainty amounting to an invitation to transgress. In *Chéri* that transgressive quality is signalled by the choice of modulating lavender and pink hues instead of white, and a military green (that's lost its aggressiveness in this company) instead of black.

*Chéri*, the figure strides forward, half-dancing. He looks like he might just walk off the canvas and out of the gallery. Hopefully he'll have no reason to! Although intentionally rendered in an un-photo realistic manner, he still feels present enough to generate the sense of a forceful bodily encounter. A delicious confusion might set in as one is confronted with the world of fashion and dangerously domestic idea of *gay* good living in a fine art context. Something which at its most tyrannically

puritan has long banished such pin-ups to the lower aesthetic orders. The reparatory (to use a EKS word - see *Novel Gazing* (1997)) program here involves a careful weighting of joyous frivolity and serious sexual political implications.

The men figured in Lukas' paintings are usually working (in restaurants, fashion houses), in confident motion (dancing) or consciously posing. As far as paintings of men go they are all somehow the colourful antithesis of the likes of the stoic Chairman-of-the-Board oily portrait (often a grease job). He quipped to me that some of his characters might be young gay sons set to disperse their families' respective fortunes. I imagine them doing so with impunity; with style, ease and absolutely no guilty conscious. *Chéri* is in the grand tradition of representing an ideal. That seems easy enough but it is the cultural implications and the certain knowledge that your ideal will not be shared in any other way than *diplomatic* politeness (at best) that gives the expression a sharp edge.

As if nonchalantly or pretending to half notice the actual walls of the gallery, the installation sketches the outline of an alternative decorous space. The paintings mask corners. *Roman Holiday* hangs free floating from crossed gymnastic ropes and *Chéri* sits on his console and leans back. It gives you the sense of furnishing an imaginary room beyond or in contradistinction to the actual one. The works form their own independent circle like a privileged clique that all the same invites participation. In part, it is a somewhat symbolic but necessary action; at the same time an affirmation of the idea of a gallery (itself ideally a protective hot house?) as a sophisticated and valid sphere of action, and insistence on a fierce artistic independence nonetheless.

On the floor, meadow height and linking the paintings is a delicate, decorative *Leporello* (1999). It is a twenty meter long photocopy based on an ornamental border



from a Venetian palazzo. Cut into it are vignettes which house a selection from Lukas' personal photo and clipping archive. The modest images are chiefly momentos of admired bouquets and their accompanying interiors collected over years. In them cut flowers and potted shrubbery rub shoulders with images of loved ones. Also a lover of flowers Firbank uses them in his novel not just as emblems of a natural beauty but as deeply socially bound symbols; accompanying as they do all the main events of life - one's floral acumen may indeed say all that there is to say.

This is true too of *Leporello*. (Incidentally, hidden deep within it are grave side photographs of the final resting places of Firbank and Lady Una Troubridge (friend and lover of John Radclyffe Hall - authoress of the *Well of Loneliness*) both uncoincidentally in Campo Verano, Rome. Lady Troubridge's thrilling epitaph, a quotation from her friend: *there is no death*.) Floral innuendo is the sweetest form of name calling for male's even suspected of supra-normal sexual tendencies. Here is the bloom: severed, clutched, worn or displayed indoors, and with companions in a well proportioned brilliant display. What new knowledge is here you may ask yourself and you may. But beware your diploma may never be granted unless you prove yourself its worthy recipient.

Dominic Eichler      February 1999,  
Berlin

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<sup>iv</sup> A publication among others by the author which bar one chapter is sadly not yet available *auf Deutsch*

<sup>v</sup> EKS again, page 72 .

<sup>vi</sup> pointedly the option taken up by the only real lover Laura de Nazianzi, and considered by the novel's gayest character Hon.'Eddy' Monteith, a son of Lord Intriguer who is instead killed off at an archeological dig in the suburbs of Sodom - 'Alas, for the *triste* obscurity of his end!' (*tFBtF* page 83).

<sup>vii</sup> titled after the novel by Colette

\* the author acknowledges the thoughts and comments of his subject on draft versions of this text - thank you Lukas!




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<sup>i</sup> *Epistemology of the Closet* Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, University of California Press (1990) pg. 156 - a definition of camp.

<sup>ii</sup> *The Flower Beneath the Foot* Ronald Firbank, Five Novels, A New Directions Book p.80

<sup>iii</sup> Because I'd never seen such particular figurative paintings dealing with male homosexuality before., nothing I'd seen before prepared me for them -I'm not exaggerating