

HELMETS

CALOTTES

Illuminated by blazingly bright light, the bodies are set against a dark background. Oblique lighting emphasises their spherical shapes and clearly reveals the porous structure of their surfaces. These feature crater-like indentations or elevated pockmarks, some parts are covered by holes with serrated edges and furrowed by cracks, while the depths of these marks are unfathomable in their shady blackness. The palette is dominated by brown and ochre shades which, where the surface is smoother, have a shimmer that oscillates between blueish and blackish hues. In one case, the dominant colour is a cold grey-blue, while in another there is a salient copper-green coating.

Sometimes, there are halos, rings of light, at the spheres' edges, especially when the light seems to hit the surface from behind. Although the lighting is used in very different ways and thus creates a variety of colour and relief effects, each of the depicted bodies has its own distinctive individuality that excludes any likelihood of mistaking one for the other. But what do we actually see? At first glance, doubtlessly shaped by the brilliant colour images of modern space science, associations arise of planetary celestial bodies, their barren

surfaces marked by countless collisions with meteorites. This effect is not least due to the velvety-black and hence ultimately non-existent - background whose unfathomable depth seems to mirror the infinite vastness of space, while at the same time the polarity of body and non-body, of matter and space, unfolds a powerful emotional potential: feelings of being abandoned in an inhospitable, hostile environment, of being lost in the sheer infinity of nothingness.

Supported by compelling connotations, this initial, transient and yet highly evocative, impression forms the leitmotif, which still resonates when, after initial confusion, a new and totally different perspective begins to take shape.

At first, there are only individual details that cause suspicion and eventually, after thorough inspection, suggest a totally different interpretation: the curvature of the spherical objects reveals deviations that could only be explained by strong visual distortion: fractures, warping and incrustations that would only be possible in metal (and hence artificially created) surfaces and that would therefore be of a tremendously smaller scale. At the edges of the 'black holes', the material seems to be comparatively thin, thus confirming that what we see is not a solid sphere but a hollow body. Also, at closer inspection, the 'halos' are no longer light reflections but rims, bent upwards like the brim of a hat.

They only seem to be blurred by the diminishing depth of field. The pictures show - we might have guessed it by now - steel helmets, or more precisely steel helmets from the Second World War in different states of mechanical destruction and corrosion.

It took Ralf Kaspers several years to buy the ten helmets shown in the photographs at Russian flea markets and to get them, in partly quite adventurous ways, through customs. It is considered verified that the helmets were used in Nazi Germany's Russian campaign (1941 - 44), but we do not know the exact facts of where and when they were found. Thus, the names and the fate of the helmets' original wearers also remain in the dark, as do the exact events leading to the loss of these helmets. Some of them may have belonged to soldiers killed in the field, others may have been discarded as a useless burden while fleeing or on the way to imprisonment.

Thus, the helmets have eventually survived as trophies taken from a defeated aggressor. The holes and cracks point towards extremely violent impact, but they could also have appeared after a helmet was lost. However, we cannot exclude the possibility that at least some of the helmets are related to fatal head injuries. Besides the mechanical damage, some helmets were exposed to adverse weather conditions, which might explain the different degrees of corrosion. In any case, we have to assume that the majority of the helmets' former owners were among the victims of a war of aggression that claimed the lives of about 2.2 million people on the German side alone.

How can we approach these relics of slaughter and butchery, especially when, unlike any other, these objects remind us of, and are closely related to, the individuals who once wore them? A 'calotte', a spherical surface, is a geometric term that is also used for hats with spherical shapes, for example for the medieval skull cap, the cap of Catholic priests or the padded lining of helmets. But it is especially the upper part of the human skull, the skull calotte, that we associate with the shape of a steel helmet. This close, ergonomically defined but also formal, connection between helmet and skull, between head cover and the head protected by such a cover, as well as the specific and practically unmistakable shape of the 'German' steel helmet charge this object with highly symbolic meaning, in a twofold and, indeed, contradictory way: on the one hand, the helmet is an abstract and anonymous representation of the German soldier per se thus designating, depending on the spectator's view-point, either the German victims of a German war of aggression or, from the Russian perspective, the enemy aggressor. In this first function, the steel helmet appears on innumerable German war memorials from both world wars and also as a flea market trophy, as a symbol of victory over the enemy, defeated at the cost of many lives.

On the other hand, however, the helmets engender a highly charged identification with their former, known or unknown, owners. The individual steel helmet, especially those marked by mechanical external impact and by violent traces of destruction, represents its former wearer and 'narrates' the story and death of an individual life. The most obvious and striking examples are helmets of soldiers who died

in the field, stuck on top of wooden crosses cobbled together to mark the new graves: we know these images from many amateur photographs shot in the Second World War. What we cannot know, however, is whether any of the helmets used in Kaspers' work come from such a grave. The helmets' representation of individual fates is additionally supported by their different sizes, by the variety of their colours and shapes. Only at a second level of reflection, when seeking further explanation, do the different degrees of destruction visible in the helmets lead us to specifically question the causes and effects of the violence.

Can we, and are we allowed to, approach this material in terms of aesthetics? Does the knowledge of the tragic events behind these material relics superimpose the impression of planetoid bodies that seem to emerge from the impenetrable blackness of space to unfold an immensely appealing play of surfaces under the glistening light of alien suns? A not exactly small part of occidental art history deliberately staged this kind of ambiguity and juxtaposed the delight in visual sensation, in the 'eye candy' of nature reproduction (to stay with contemporary terminology) with the symbols of vanitas, with the constant memento mori of all that is earthly and transient. It is, and must be, permissible to reverse this view: the grief of remembrance, the meaning and purpose of memorials (with his cycle of works, Ralf Kaspers indeed intended to also create amemorial) is rendered pointless and obsolete when there is no perspective of hope. By using means of artistic staging and alienation - i.e. lighting, depth of field and spatial composition - Kaspers generates an oscillating image that rises above the object and is no longer bound by the connotations defined by the object. The impression of celestial bodies is at once false and true, and knowing that the images' subjects are steel helmets does not necessarily exclude another, freely imagined interpretation. Despite all due restraint, enjoying an image as image does not need any excuses. Art can delight us, move us or shock us - and sometimes, rarely enough, it can do all of this at once.

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