

**BEN WILLIKENS**

22 July – 30 August 2022

Opening: Saturday, 30 July 2022, 11.30 a.m.

Ben Willikens and Nikolaus Ruzicka in conversation at 12 noon

“I am the painter of the rooms of human beings”, says **BEN WILLIKENS** (\*1939 Leipzig) in the film made for his current major retrospective in the Schauwerk Sindelfingen.

The constructed environment of the human species says more about it than its likeness. This idea has been manifested in over 1600 works since **BEN WILLIKENS** began his artistic creativity over thirty years ago. The window thereby plays a central role as the metaphor of the transition from interior to exterior, consequently the artist dedicates himself exclusively to this subject in his newest series. In the *Anstaltsbilder* (Pictures of Institutions) of the initial period it served – barred or walled up – as a symbol of the deprivation of freedom. Now it has a positive connotation: open, with a view of the sea, mountain, sunrise and sunset. At the intersection between interior and exterior, the window offers the view from the private sphere to the outside into a liberating, independent, contemplative natural landscape.

The series *ORTE 2* (Places 2) is also dominated by outside windows. In spring 2022 this new group of works was presented for the first time in the context of the solo exhibition by **BEN WILLIKENS** in the Albertina in Vienna. We consider ourselves very fortunate to be able to present five masterpieces from this group of works in our exhibition. Aesthetic blue spaces inspire the imagination of the observer: function and location remain unclear. Furnishings and views of a barren landscape evoke something sinister. *Raum 1643* (Room 1643) is “almost exclusively about an explosion and destruction – the dissolution of the gesture of power”<sup>1</sup>: the ‘Great Hall’ at Hitler’s mountain resort in Berchtesgaden is shown, destroyed by the Allies. The series *ORTE* (from 1996) was a survey of the architecture of the Third Reich. **BEN WILLIKENS** turns his attention to the interior of the horror in *ORTE 2. Raum 1421* and *Raum 1445* contextually anticipate the downfall of the Nazi regime: an intact lattice window (*Raum 1421*) dissolves and opens up the view to the mountain, which until then was shrouded in fog (*Raum 1445*). Two small-scale works (*Raum 1647* and *Raum 1646*) are paraphrases of the large-scale *Raum 1445*. As if through the zoom function of a camera lens the artist here focuses on the one hand on the view of the mountain and on the other the sparse interior: repression and dictatorship come to an end, hope burgeons.

Since the mid-1980s **BEN WILLIKENS** has designed stage architecture and sets for renowned theatre and opera houses. The artist devises a spatial construction which he takes as his starting-point, gives it a painterly interpretation and then, based on this, designs a stage set. *Raum 1644* was created at the same time as the design for the sets and costumes of *Oedipus/Antigone* in the Grand Théâtre Luxembourg in spring 2022. It is the most surreal picture in the exhibition: a field hospital on the street is encircled by the dome of a circus tent. The delineation to the exterior is missing. The emptiness, silence and mysterious atmosphere are reminiscent of Giorgio de Chirico, leading exponent of so-called ‘metaphysical painting’ as the precursor of Surrealism.

Contextually, the *Räume 1653, 1654* and *1655* follow on from the *Anstaltsbilder* (Pictures of Institutions) of the 1970s. Pencil sketches from this time served the artist as inspiration. Originally the deserted interiors were exclusively in austere grey, white and black that **BEN WILLIKENS** now extends with the colour blue, which he feels best express the “antagonism against humanity”<sup>2</sup>. Everything comes full circle in an incomparable oeuvre created in old age.

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1 Sandy Willikens in conversation with Ben Willikens. Exhibition catalogue Albertina Vienna. (Vienna 2022). p.70

2 Ben Willikens in the exhibition film *Räume und Gedächtnis*, Schauwerk Sindelfingen, 2022