

THOMAS WEBER

Come closer. Keep your distance.

Karin Kontny

The work of the sculptor, Thomas Weber, plays with ideas of proximity, distance and longing. And with the artists' own identity.



Untitled - ceramic with gold lustre - 2004 - max. height 63 cm
all photos - Daniel Weber



From "The Village" - terracotta - 2004/05 - max. height 69 cm

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Medical Examination this way" it says in faded red felt-tip on a sign on the ground floor entrance. Location: an old grey barrack in Ludwigsburg, near Stuttgart. Behind the door, where once the fitness of recruits was examined, Thomas Weber's latest work is now stored, made between 2002 and 2005.

The figures, between knee high and life size, have never been exhibited. They are made of coils of rolled clay, and they await their examination in turn. Either in the natural colour of the material, the red, black or white of the clay, or glazed in an almost garish blue or pink; others jet black with golden hoods, lids, pompoms and pointed hooks. In the next room: white rectangular boxes with mysterious interiors in coloured coils of clay. A ceramic universe.

In previous years there had been groups of coils wound into rolls ("Rolls and Loops", 1993-2001), a fleet of clay trucks, tanks and pick-ups ("Fleet", 2000-2003) or figures with mushroom-like heads and acorn-shaped tips ("The Strangers I+II", 1995 and 2001), which Weber had arranged in groups, but now he shows the masses called up for the draft and surrendering themselves. But the objects assembled in the cellars of the barracks do not appear homogenous or uniform. They seem to be much more like people; like individuals showing themselves off - voluntarily or not.

"My work has to do with people", says Thomas Weber, a resident of Ludwigsburg, "and so it has to do with me." Of course there is nothing revolutionary about this - he is aware of that. Weber, who has won numerous scholarships abroad as well as a number of prizes for his claywork (e.g. the prize for ceramic sculpture in Offenburg for "The Strangers"), and who has also taught at the Academy in Stuttgart, sees the value of art in a different respect: "The quality of what I make with my hands lies in its authenticity and honesty with myself."

These words sound simple, but Weber's work shows yet again how difficult the supposedly simple can sometimes be. The figures in the

installation "The Village" (1992 to the present) were originally in earth colours. To make these figures, he rolled out coils of clay under his palms and built them up into cones. This is a technique he has been using since he started working with clay. The figures seem to have been made by children, jutting upwards as they stand side by side, without touching each other - but still belonging together. They are linked by being there, by their very existence, they are a village, a community. Even if they look as awkward as teenagers at their first big party hiding themselves by talking big. As if they did not know themselves or the others yet. The bodies are crowned by rigid shaggy hair or fringes or a sting. Is this an original kind of head-dress intended to attract others or a screen to hide behind and fend off others? Individuals who seek to be close to themselves and to others, or who turn away from others and draw back into their shell. Weber's piece, "The Village" permits complex layers of interpretation and does not live from two dimensional explanations but from the tension it builds up. "Rounded, dynamic and angular forms belong together", says Weber. "They are metaphors for the interplay of proximity and distance between people. Allegories for the yearning for security and protection and the aggression that wants to keep others at a distance as soon as proximity is established."

The figures measuring between ten and 165 cm which Thomas Weber exhibited in 2003 during the European ceramics symposium in Gmunden in Austria are similar too. In the natural colours of the clay - white, red or deep manganese black - they stand in serried ranks, like an encircling army. Who is behind the earth-coloured figure whose head is split open by a slate coloured slab of clay? Why are star-shaped spurs stabbed into the body of another? Is the alien-looking white rod an arm? Weber spontaneously jammed a piece of hard, dry clay into the mouth of another figure, making it mute.

But there is also a decisive curiosity towards the alien that guides the gaze towards Weber's figures. Under this curious gaze, the