

# IN GAN

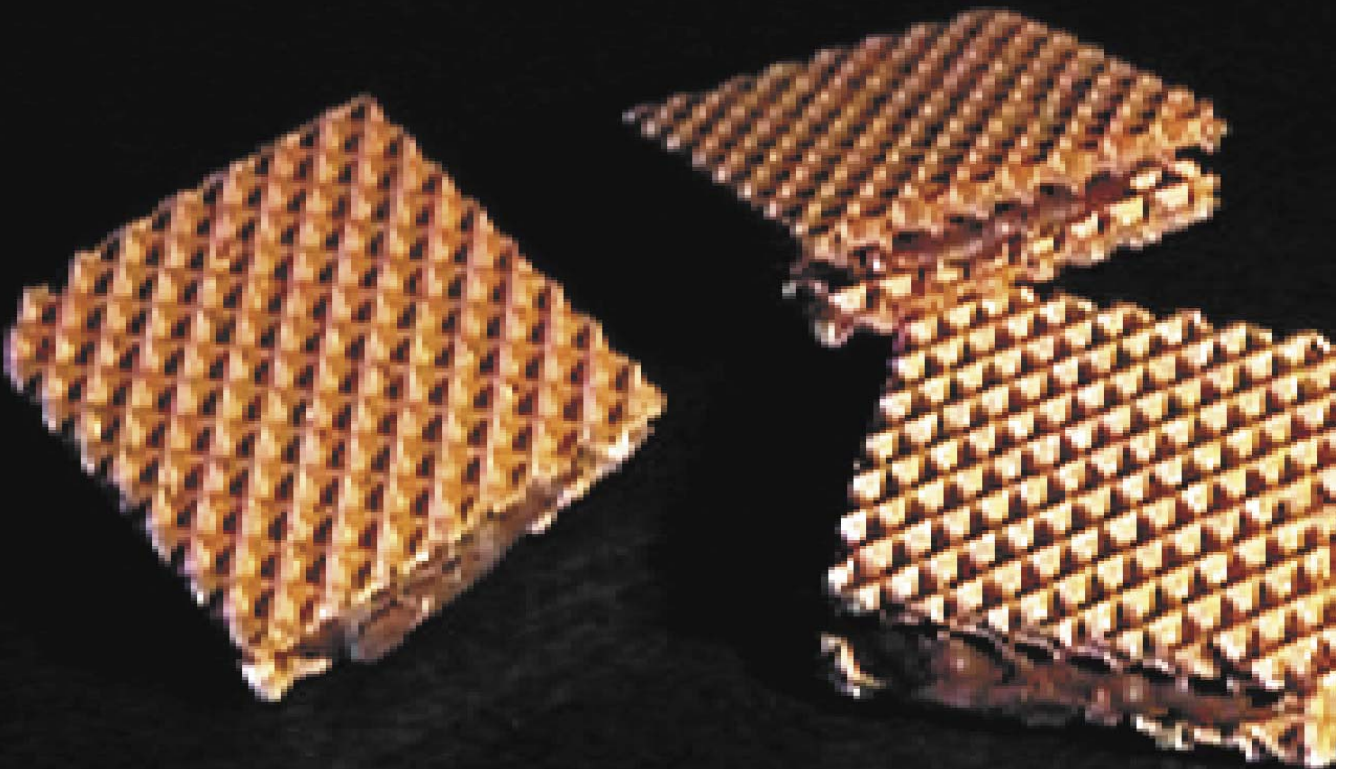
MAGAZIN

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KUNSTVEREIN INGAN e.V.

## Jörg Oetken

With an Essay  
by Michael Strowik



*Toter Frosch*, Videostill Inkprint on MDF,  
Epoxid, 75 × 100 cm (29.53 × 39.37 in), 2004



# Stills

Essay by Michael Strowik

Left: Angular aspect

Right: Detail

*Stills* is the overall title of a series of representational images by the Berlin-based artist, Jörg Oetken. These pictures are initially surprising in that they present themselves as classical paintings. Moreover, at first sight most of them look like still life pictures in the traditional painting style of the Old Masters. I am using the term, "style of the Old Masters", as a neutral descriptive phrase here. It could be interpreted in a decidedly positive way as a style of presentation that fulfils the viewer's needs for detailed and realistic reproduction, as work which has been carefully arranged and presented with a tangibility that is immediately sensual, set in an atmospheric and expressive light, with a striking color scheme, and reproduced with a profound impact on space.

Denis Diderot's art reviews are arguably the best known texts among the early art criticism of the bourgeois era. The artist whom he praised most highly was Jean-Baptiste Siméon Chardin. The genre much eulogized by Diderot was the still life. In the tradition of *imitatio*, Chardin's still life paintings achieved the highest levels of skill. Diderot's reviews turned them into a sensation. However, traditionally this painting genre had been regarded as the lowest and most trivial type, whose artistic value was to be considered of the least value because the subject of the picture



consisted of nothing but accessories. At best, the still life was considered of use in teaching art and in demonstrating painting virtuosity. The negative image of the still life has not changed in the meantime – it enjoys the least esteem for the highest level of artistic skills.

The majority of the large-format panel pictures by Jörg Oetken first appear to be just that – in the style of the Old Masters, they are atmospherically presented arrangements of food, drink, flowers: still life. However, Oetken's pictures are not paintings. The trivial subject matter is accompanied by two of the most common current visual media – the video picture and the computer print-out. The artist himself provides the plainest and simultaneously clearest description:

"The ink prints in the *Stills* project were taken as low resolution stills of 768 × 567 pixels with a digital video camera, printed, mounted on an MDF panel and laminated with a layer of transparent epoxy resin.

*They are reproductions of paintings from catalogues and are made up of real objects which are then photographed. They are based on the composition of classics that are popular or important in the history of art."*

JÖRG OETKEN: *Stills*, 2006



Left: Detail

Right: Angular aspect



Despite the obvious visibility of the technical craftsmanship, the pictures still have a penetrating and direct impact on the viewer. It seems to me that Diderot's exuberant words about Chardin's still life paintings are also valid for some of Oetken's *Stills*.

*"This truly is a painter. (...) The subjects jump off the canvas and have a truth that deceives the eye. (...) One just needs to take those biscuits and eat them, to cut that bitter orange and squeeze it, merely to lift that glass of wine and drink it, to pick up that fruit and peel it, to lift that pâté and take a knife to it. (...) Chardin fools both you and me as often as he wants."*

Diderot's hymn draws on a long tradition. In classical antiquity, praise of a painter's artistic skills was already determined by the

The production of the pictures is as down-to-earth as their description. From the point where the technical apparatus takes over the picture – the moment when the camera takes the photograph – the image always follows the same process, which is based on a clearly defined and constant quantity of data related to the number of pixels: consistent, uncompromising standardization. The presentation of *Stills* as a series that deals not only with still life, but also potentially with all known forms of the picture, makes this even clearer. The low resolution reveals a further aspect of the digital medium: equalization within the picture. The art critic and cultural theorist, Rosalind Krauss, sees a connection between the printing raster and our modern lifestyle, democracy and mass culture: the raster suffuses and dismantles all parts of the picture with the same equanimity; no exceptions are made for any of the picture's subjects; none of them remain invulnerable to dissolution into mathematically precise rows and columns. None of the subjects are of greater or lesser value to the raster. Reasons, motives, design – everything is divided up equally as a simple picture area. In Oetken's largest format in *Stills*, colored squares measuring 2×2 millimeters – the blatantly obvious resolution of the digital video still, the pixels – reveal the raster and granulation of digital image technology.



*Gerupfte Hühner*, Videostill Inkprint on MDF,  
Epoxid, 145 × 110 cm (57.09 × 43.31 in), 2006



*Granatäpfel mit Schmetterling*, Videostill Inkprint on MDF,  
Epoxid, 145 × 110 cm (57.09 × 43.31 in), 2005



Left: Detail

Right: Angular aspect



of the grapes in Zeuxis's painting: butterflies in flower arrangements, flies on food or freshly killed game. This type of pleasure in the sensuality of what is represented and its representation is one way of approaching Jörg Oetken's paintings, even though the low resolution appears to vehemently contradict the deception of the eye. Indeed, for the viewer who enthusiastically wants to get lost in the arrangement portrayed, there seems to be an insurmountable barrier placed in front of the picture. Perhaps (s)he



effect on the viewer's senses. The highest praise was reserved for the complete deception of the eye. In the conflict between Zeuxis and Parrhasius, when the former shows the latter his painting, the birds pick at it because the grapes in the painting appear to be real. However, Zeuxis's skills are surpassed by his opponent Parrhasius, when he himself is deceived by the latter's painting; Zeuxis tries to pull a veil aside so that he can see Parrhasius's picture properly but the veil is part of the painting. Oetken's *Stills* have these sensual components. In particular, the still life pictures in this series – like their role models – also realistically depict objects of sensual pleasure and are carefully arranged and atmospherically lit: fruit, cakes and pastries, flowers, game, seafood, glasses of wine, cooked and raw food. In between, one sees simple or fancy tableware: bowls, cups, a small wooden board, a knife; and, as in classical still life paintings, small living creatures, which can be regarded as comments on or references to the story

Left: Angular aspect  
Right: Detail

will be annoyed about this and will wish that the low resolution could be pushed to one side like the veil in Parrhasius's painting.

However, Oetken's series of prints, which have been carefully mounted on MDF panels and varnished, also evoke the question of what use we make of pictures today and how this use determines our imagination and our perception of art. In other words, his pictures become a reason to examine our concrete practices and understanding of art. As in texts about art, where what has already been written inevitably seems to reappear – such as the topos of the *trompe l'oeil* in the story dating from the classical era quoted above, on the one hand, and the beginning of modern art criticism on the other – the method of recourse to tradition is also one that the visual arts – before photography, this was mainly painting – have always employed. Oetken's panels clearly make this a subject for discussion; all of these pieces stem from a direct model from the reservoir of paintings among popular, American-



European art history. In this way, the artist uses his style to pursue a private and very individual project, that is, to create his own gallery of masterpieces, his own museum. In spite of the private nature of this project and the subjectivity involved in the choice of the pictures, everything here concerns the public, the universal, perhaps even the common sphere: the museum, the tradition of art history, the pictures that shape our imagination and our concept of what art and artistic pictures are. The idea here is to extract from the collective, cultural matrix.

A comparison with Elaine Sturtevant's work shows how Oetken goes about setting up this museum and where it stands in relation to other similar art practices. Since 1964, Sturtevant has been working on a collection of pieces that are identical to original works in all details of technique, production, color and form: pictures and paintings but also works of sculpture, mostly from the spectrum of what was then contemporary art – Johns, Warhol, Duchamp, Gonzales-Torres, Kiefer etc. – works that now belong to the icons of recent art history. Are her pieces fakes? Copies? Quotations? And what then is the status of the original work of art? Are Sturtevant's pieces cover versions? One of the concepts suggested in the light of the large Sturtevant retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art (MMK) in Frankfurt, Germany, in 2005 was that of re-enactment. The director of the museum, Udo Kittelmann, had the building emptied for a large show of pieces by Sturtevant, thus bringing into existence a perplexing museum of important modern works created by a single artist. From the



*Black Iris*, Videostill Inkprint on MDF,  
Epoxid, 145 × 110 cm (57.09 × 43.31 in), 2004



*Jupiter (Landschaft bei Eckwarden)*, Videostill Inkprint on MDF,  
Epoxid, 132 × 100 cm (51.97 × 39.37 in), 2006



Left: Detail

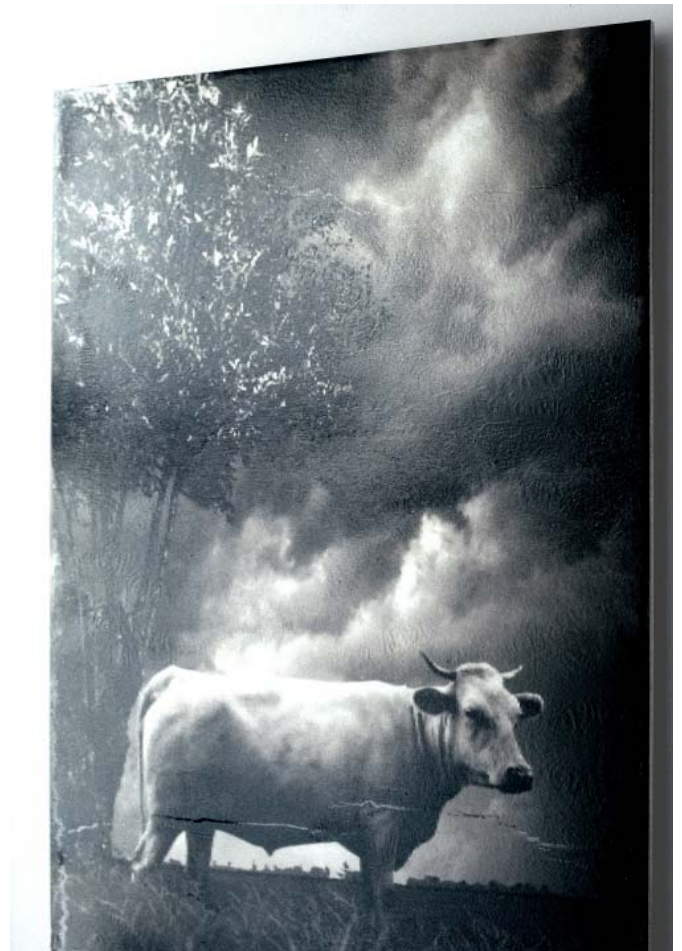
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layers of the concept of a picture: a picture may also be a sight, a view, a point of view or an arrangement which permits points of view that can be perceived as pictures. Similar to Thomas Demand's paper arrangements that are only produced for a photograph and, as an intermediate product, are destroyed by the artist, low resolution stills are all that remain of Jörg Oetken's tangible sculptures. After being processed by the networked equipment of digital image practices – camera, computer, storage medium, software, image processing, printer and mounting on a panel – these painting-like images experience a treatment that in its turn is related to what has happened to the newly presented pictures: They are varnished and from then on exist as individual originals that, like paintings, are subject to aging. But even this last experience is subject to another artistic re-staging – the traces left on pictures by the passing of time are also imitated. Aging

imaginary museum of photographic reproductions that collects works which have never been exhibited together in one space, a real museum of duplicated works generated by a process of re-enactment was created.

Many aspects of Jörg Oetken's work are different to Sturtevant's and a comparison between them does not to be correct at first. However, similar motives dominate; there are surprising parallels in the concrete artistic work. The concept of re-enactment also seems to me to shine an elucidative light on the artistic impulse in Oetken's video stills. However, the artist's concern is not to make the question of original and copy the direct topic of his work. The low resolution reveals the digital medium too clearly; the signature of the technology used to create the pictures is too obvious. The pictures are adaptations of their role models; they do not try to cause confusion with the original. Nevertheless, they do raise questions about the originality of the picture. And although the technique used to create the pictures is radically different, the artistic arrangement of an image – before it is accessed, retained, permanently captured in the space – is a form of reproduction that becomes a repetition, a re-staging, a re-enactment of the picture. The way we use language indicates the many



Left: Detail

Right: Angular aspect

and temporality are re-enacted in the form of symbols – during the drying process, the artist intervenes with alternate heating and cooling in order to recreate the many types of fissures that appear on the surfaces of oil paintings in the course of a decade-long process of drying. However, these processes are not appropriately implemented as regards the role model, its age and its materiality, but are instead applied to all the pictures in the form of a standardized procedure. Sturtevant's repetitions of works of art are re-enactments that are faithful to the original, while Jörg Oetken's *Stills* superficially all bear the mark of a standardized, mechanic, never varying procedure. This corresponds to the format specified by the settings of the video camera, the resolution of 768 × 576 pixels and the pragmatic choice of the size of the picture, of which the largest is based on a further technical specification: the distribution options, including the question of transport, are also part of the production of art. The 110 × 145 cm format can just about be comfortably loaded into a medium-sized car. Standardization – of the sizes, the materiality, the surface in its contingency on the medium of production/reproduction, and the orienting of the external picture parameters on the distribution medium (the illustrated book, the print, the computer monitor and so on) are now precisely those factors that constitute the current perception of pictures. And this also applies to a large extent to artistic production after it has been dealt with by art history and exploited by the culture industry immediately afterwards. However, it should be mentioned that both first make art



accessible to a larger number of people up to a certain point. As we know, photography, projection, reproduction and prints have rapidly furthered art history and made comparative methods possible in the first place. The use of image technologies and of the entire collection of cultural traditions by the culture industry certainly blurs and reduces all the contents that it touches – nevertheless, popularization also first promotes a widespread dissemination of knowledge of the arts, and insights into artistic techniques and the picture heritage handed down through the ages. In accordance with these insights, Jörg Oetken deals critically, but in a relaxed way, with his role models. Before he starts work on a new picture, he does not study the original in a museum but instead uses the resources where he learned about the pictures and which also largely determine our knowledge of art, namely reproductions in illustrated books. In their form as standardized procedures of processed pictures, Oetken's *Stills* deal critically with the imaginary museum (André Malraux) created by art history and its popularizations, which have had a long-term influence on our iconology. However, although his pictures directly refer to reproductions, they themselves are not reproductions. As three-dimensional works made up of real objects placed in front of a video camera, they are re-enactments and are closely related to and in accordance with the activities of the artists who worked before Oetken on the same picture.



*Flag*, Videostill Inkprint on MDF, Epoxid,  
110 × 145 cm (43.31 × 57.09 in), 2003



*Türen*, Videostill Inkprint on MDF, Epoxid,  
100 × 132 cm (39.37 × 51.97 in), 2006



Left: VILHELM HAMMERSHÖI, *Offene Türen*, Öl auf Leinwand, 52 × 60 cm (20.47 × 23.62 in), 1905, Kopenhagen, David Collection

Right: *Türen*, Videostill Inkprint on MDF, Epoxid, 100 × 132 cm (39.37 × 51.97 in), 2006



Strangely, Oetken's pictures – prints whose derivation from a digital camera is placed with blatant emphasis in the foreground – nonetheless have a very painting-like effect. A comparison with Gerhard Richter's painting comes to mind. However, Richter is a totally committed painter. Yet where Richter paints the fuzziness of photography, the viewer sees a painting that in turn is not blurred, that cannot be blurred. In Richter's own words:

*"(...) as pictures are not produced so that they can be compared with reality, they cannot be blurred or imprecise or different (different to what?) For instance, how is paint on a canvas supposed to be blurred?"*

Similarly, Oetken's prints are not low resolution – the individual pixels are high resolution and precisely reproduced. While they are printed, they are still painting-like areas that skillfully play with the characteristics of digital technology, the painting tradition and the paraphrasing of concrete pictures. In spite of the blurriness of the low resolution and the direct references to pre-existing models, this game is still extremely subtle. The materiality of the panels can be understood from the theoretical ideas explained above. And yet it is not easy to maintain the distanced, theoretical observation, focused on the complex and elaborate production of the pictures, as the subject of the picture repeat-

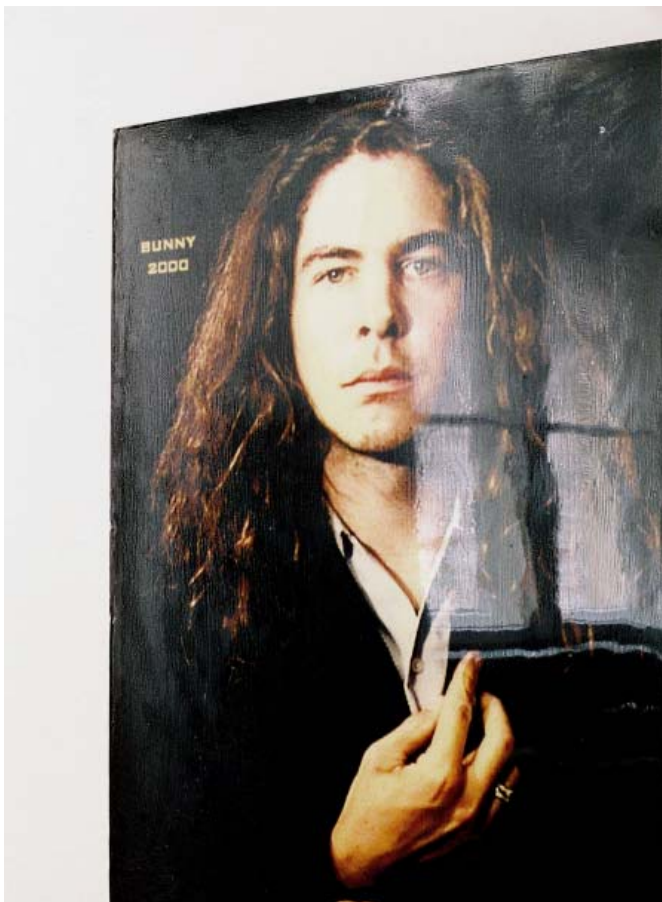
edly shines through the surfaces. One can distinguish between three layers here: the two-dimensional print, the fissured structure of the sealing glaze of the varnish and the detailed design of the reproduced objects. In this way, the structure of biscuits and waffles and the scales of fish form a type of raster of their own as a result of reappearing, repetitive patterns. In the most exciting parts of the pictures, these levels end up in flickering contrast. To my mind, it is the difference between transparency and flatness, which in the end cannot be explained, that accounts for the quality of Oetken's *Stills*. In the nineteenth century, photography wrested the task of an eye-deceiving reproduction of the world away from painting. As a result, painting re-explored its own possibilities by searching for the truth of its methods. This was soon joined by reflection on the new, technical visual media. Today, as well as in hindsight, the widespread mutual enrichment of technical, apparatus-based visual media and painting is conspicuous and acknowledged. Jörg Oetken's *Stills* are an astonishing series of pictures that appear to gather together all the border crossings and mutual reflections between photography, print and painting. However, in the final analysis, it is difficult not to revert to a position that luxuriates in the sensuality of the images. Oetken's pictures deny the realistic reproduction and presentation functions of photography and digital image technology as radically as they simultaneously try to understand how the eye of the viewer can be seduced to lose itself in them. As a result, after passing from intellectual contemplation and distance



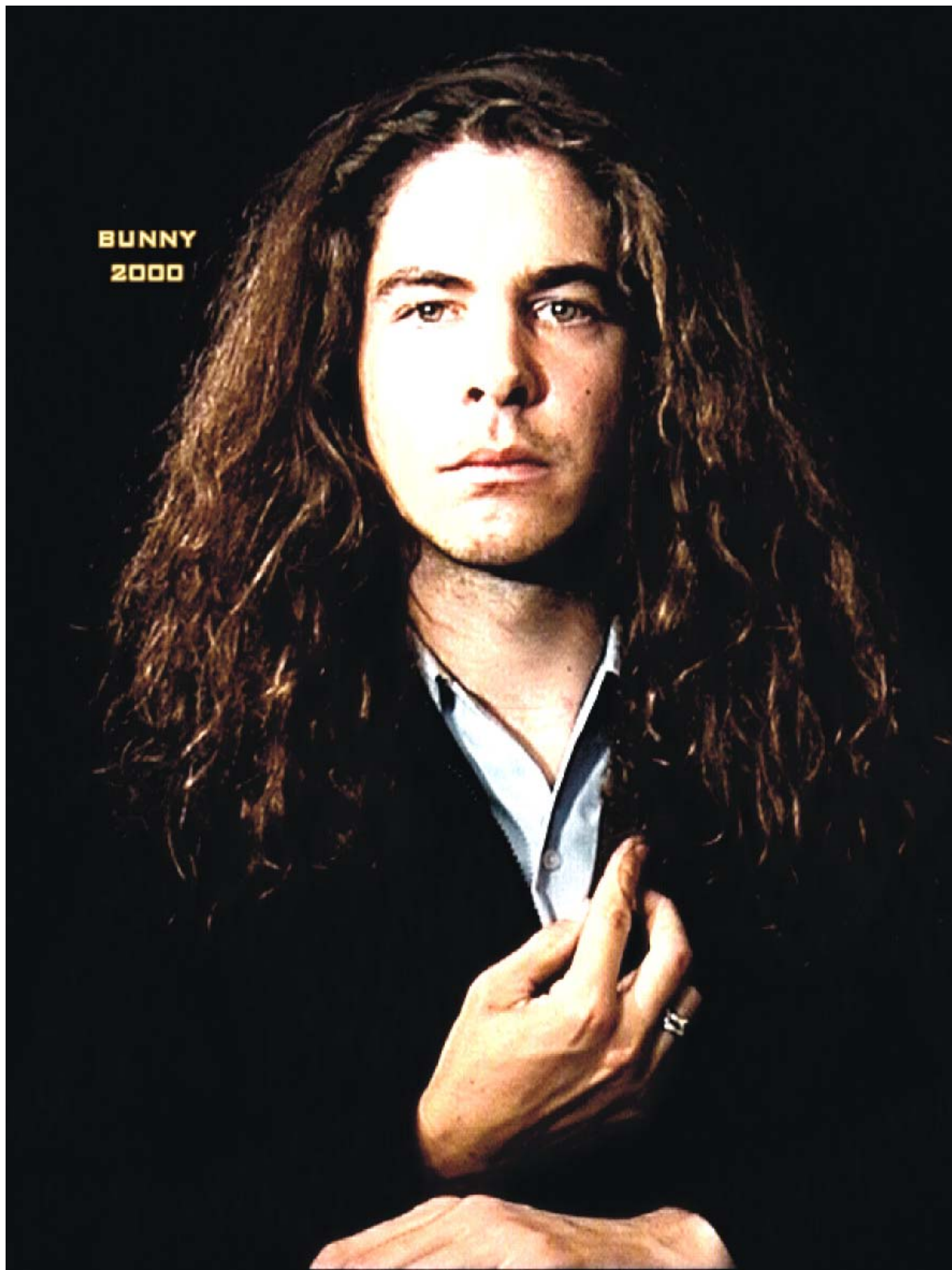
Left: Angular aspect  
Right: Detail

to the images portrayed, one finds oneself back again at a direct sensual state of emotion. These still life pieces are very skillfully produced. Naively and touched, one would like to say "I see that ham, that bunch of flowers, that bundle of asparagus, that fruit arranged in such a life-like way in front of my eyes that I will never tire of looking at them."

By MICHAEL STROWIK, FRANKFURT, GERMANY, 2006



*Bunny 2000*, Videostill Inkprint on MDF, Epoxid,  
100 × 75 cm (39.37 × 29.53 in), 2003




Left: *Kekse*, Videostill, Inkprint on MDF, Epoxid,  
160 × 119 cm (62.99 × 46.85 in), 2004

Right: Angular aspect



## I M P R I N T

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### Cover

*Kekse*, Videostill Inkprint on MDF, Epoxid,  
160 × 119 cm (62.99 × 46.85 in), 2004