

Jörg Heiser, “Greetings from the Benelux Pt. 2, *Frieze Blog*, February 2009

I loved Leon Vranken’s show at Stella Lohaus, read more here. In any case he presented anything but a ‘clean solution’. And you can’t really talk about sobriety when it comes to the show at Extra City: the Kunsthalle-type space run by German Anselm Franke (formerly Kunst-Werke Berlin) currently features what is possibly the craziest show in Europe at the moment, and the main reason for my short stop-over in Antwerp: ‘Justine Frank (1900–1943) A Retrospective’. The coloured walls are full of work of the Jewish-Belgian surrealist who was a lover of Georges Bataille and died in Tel Aviv in 1943. Small canvasses and watercolours, most dating from the 1930s, an orgy of excess and obscenity, much in the vein of a Surrealist desublimation, of polymorphous perversity, mixed in with Jewish iconography – at the time of the Holocaust. All of this work is a contemporary invention of Israeli artist Roe Rosen – Justine Frank is his alter ego. It’s a bit as if Kara Walker’s subject was not the trauma and impossibility to come to terms with slavery in the US, but the trauma and impossibility to come to terms with the history of anti-Semitism.

One could write this whole endeavour off as frivolous provocation. But that would mean to miss the crucial point. Roe Rosen rather consciously and in the most reflected manner possible brings up the question whether it is truly the case that only abstract art can adequately respond to the Holocaust and its aftermath in Jewish contemporary culture – with the emphasis on ‘adequate’. How adequate is adequate? Does trauma really only warrant a void and the negation of representation – doesn’t it inherently ask for a kind of hysterical overdetermination? Israeli, Berlin-based curator Hila Peleg – initiator of the Justine Frank project at Extra City – says that Roe Rosen’s credibility and earnestness is not least confirmed by the fact that he has been one of the most influential and thorough art teachers in Israel (art and art history at Bezalel Academy of Art and at Beit Berl College).