

# Seeking Shelter

Interview with moki

conducted by Anika Heusermann (AH), March 2015

AH: In your current pictures one sees tent- and hut-like structures, built from wooden panels and boards, cardboard, boxes, tarps and fabric – some fragile and temporary, some sturdy with a door and a window. There are many different forms of housing and shelter. In your book you quote from Gaston Bachelard's philosophical study in several passages. Here, Bachelard describes the house as a place of intimate space: caves, nooks, a roof – spaces that have emerged from an existential necessity, as that also created by animals, for example nests or shells: Shelter as protection or refuge. What were you seeking in this context?

moki: In Shelter I have explored forms and variations of going into hiding, shielding, disguising or veiling yourself, including the apparent need to create a space of your own and to feel safe there. For me this suggests many facets and this is why I also wanted to break it up thematically. So I asked myself: What actually is a shelter? How far does it reach? The artist Hundertwasser once stated that human beings had three skins. They would be born into the first, the second would be their dress and the third the façade of their home. You could extend this idea by the social environment in which a human being moves about, meaning family and friends. In the images I create we see depictions of places and structures that offer refuge in a purely physical sense, such as huts or masks, covers or clothing, but also illustrations of a social shelter, one that could manifest itself through the comforting sensation of belonging to a group. You will also see body postures that offer a kind of protection and a place to stay, like huddling or curling up or even just closing one's eyes.

AH: This describes quite a broad movement, from the self-chosen haven of a tree house or playful children's hiding places to images that express the necessity of creating a protective space for oneself. There are, indeed, quite a few images that point specifically to your social urban environment in Hamburg and Berlin, to people wandering about with a shopping cart filled with their belongings, people on a park bench ...Was this a vital impulse for the Shelter series?

moki: I live in Berlin near the Oranienplatz, where refugees lived in self-constructed huts and tents for about two years. The huts were mainly built of whatever these people could find in the streets: recycled materials like plastic tarps, wooden panels, mattresses, scraps of fabric – a patchwork of differ-

ent surfaces. What was being improvised by the floors and walls of these structures, was a private sphere, a safe haven. By creating a boundary, a dialectic of the inner and outer world arises, and it is this field of tension that has caught my interest.

The hut-like constructions visualize the needs of the refugees and show the creativity that people can develop due to a lack of materials or being reduced to the use of found materials. Objects that are produced with recycled materials – whether it be dwellings, toys, household appliances or pieces of clothing – all are bearers of a hidden beauty and the undeniable misery behind it. It seems as though there was a longing inherent in them, like an unbreakable willpower to create something and to realize it, no matter what resources are available.

AH: Where do you find images and motifs?

moki: I constantly find picture material that I want to keep – for the most part I do research on the Internet, but I also find it important to be out on the streets with my camera. So, before starting a series, there are always images that I can revert to and which I then assemble into something new. My Shelter archive is filled with very different pictorial subjects: from the covered-up sewing machine to self-made head protection, to the designer shopping cart which in a flash can be transformed into a place to sleep. Quite chaotic, one might think, but I have a guiding principle that ties it all together. Many of the motifs of Shelter can be traced back to real encounters with shelter seekers and refugees, some whom I approached directly and captured their portraits. On other occasions, I took photos without getting noticed, like the portrait of Napuli L. (page 96) or Karl-Heinz G. (page 56-57).

In addition, there are those friends of mine who know what I am working on and who send me pictures. This is how I received a photo of a homeless woman from Kreuzberg who wraps herself in scraps of fabric that she artfully ties in knots and then plucks them off and burns them (page 134). I also stage my own settings whenever I can't find a fitting template. The entwined lovers amidst a sea of blankets (page 73), for example, and the man in the patchwork blanket (page 44) are such composed pictures. And there are paintings that have other paintings as an inspiration, such as Caspar David Friedrich's Sea of Ice (page 110) or The Last of England by Ford Madox Brown (page 50).

AH: Does it matter to you to know when, how and where a picture originated? When you pick up on an old painting or a photo that you took yourself or that someone has sent you, you usually know much more about the context of its creation than when you find an image on the web. There, the motif can be much more detached from its origin.

moki: What counts is the image or impression that the picture conveys. Of course, the background interests me, but, for the viewer, most of this context is lost through my reworking and recomposition of the picture. The compilation of pictorial content of the most varied origins, rearranging it, reworking it and thus bringing it forward into a new overall context is an important part of my art. The juxtaposition of subjects and the resulting associations lead to a concentration capable of conveying the image and basic feeling, the underlying sentiment. In the case of Shelter, it is this deep longing for comfort and security that resonates in the work.

AH: A longing for security is also reflected in the utilized material and in the visual execution of the work: Warm tones of brown and beige are predominant and the appeal of wood or wood texture is a defining characteristic. The images, in general, and the puzzle-like impression of the shelter constructions, in particular, also recall the woodcut technique. In some cases one only detects on a closer view that the wood texture is painted – even if on wood. How did this come about?

moki: In painting, there are lines that almost always get lost in the process of painting over the preparatory drawing. These lines have captured my interest. In color woodcuts they remain intact. I thus experimented and, with the support of my uncle, a restorer, initially made an inlay of wood veneer. But instead of producing other pictures using the inlay technique, I went back to drawing or rather painting and replicated the wood grain in this manner. To this effect, I paint wood onto wood, often using scraps from a carpenter's workshop or found pieces of wood. I orient myself on the grain direction – picking up on the existing veins and knotholes – or I alter them. In the past, furniture was painted to resemble fine wood and thus make it look more precious. This imitation, the art of deception or disguise, is fascinating to me. The way the puzzle-like surfaces of wood grain interlock recall camouflage patterns, thus a disguise. It is the disguise, the imitation of a surface, that creates a protective space. When disguised you become invisible, and being invisible makes you safe and invulnerable. This aspect connects my last book *How to Disappear* with Shelter.

AH: In *How to Disappear* this chameleon-like blending-in with the environment was more a vanishing without a trace, a dissolving or decomposing in nature. The work dealt with conditions of being on the margins of defined identities, with ghosts as the “other” of identity. In comparison, your current pictures are more concrete and physical.

moki: It appears as though my artistic work has come a bit closer to the real world. *How to Disappear* explores strategies of escapism – the flight from

the world, getting away from reality. The new concept is more tangible. Where there were figures dreaming themselves out of reality, unreal places and a host of fantastic creatures, the images in Shelter reflect a realistic context: victims of natural disasters, wars or poverty, but also places and situations capable of counterbalancing the worst aspects of being at the mercy of harsh circumstances. The challenges we are facing on a global scale seem so overwhelming that it is tempting to escape into the private sphere and to “disappear”. It is, therefore, all the more important to recognize the forms of protection, refuge and safe havens, and not to recede into one’s own shell. This recognition can be a powerful motivation for action.







Ford Madox Brown, "The Last of England," 1855





Caspar David Friedrich, "Eismeer," 1823/1824

