

Isle of the Dead

Whilst many photographers orient their work around colleagues' photos, I'm more enthusiastic about classical art – particularly from the 19th century, as this most resembles the ideal of perfect, almost photographic reproduction. One of the last heroes of this era, and a leading representative of symbolism, was Arnold Böcklin (1821–1901) from Switzerland. His most famous painting is "The Isle of the Dead" ("Toteninsel"). He painted five versions of it, and this is the third from 1883.



I wanted to take a photo of such a wonderful scene! What I didn't want, though, was a mere copy – it should serve as an example on which to build new ideas. I love turning things around, shifting meanings. If Böcklin's "Isle of the Dead" symbolises a large burial chamber, then I wanted to find a counterpoint, and what could be more to the contrary than a jingling merry-go-round and a balloon seller? First, we built an almost(!) exact miniature model of the island. A perfect reproduction would have turned it into a "find the 10 differences" picture ... not what I had in mind! My brother Markus spent nine days working on the model of the rocks. As I couldn't find any cedar trees like the ones in the original, I took pictures of some poplars and "cedared" them with the aid of image processing. Finding a merry-go-round was the next challenge. I spent ages searching for something suitable, and finally found one in Paris. However, once it was edited into the picture I realised that it was far too pompous and practically eclipsed the other elements. I finally found what I was looking for at a historical fair: a small, cosy, steam-driven merry-go-round – perfect! In the original, a boat is moving towards the island, so my



idea was for a balloon-selling page – and who better for the role than Markus? – to be sailing away from the island. The only hitch was finding a suitable wooden boat ... not an easy task nowadays.



Creating this picture as "free " work (and as the prelude to a series) was a real delight. When you spend so much time involved with a particular piece, you begin to develop a certain intimacy with the artist. Böcklin was a very accurate worker and I learnt to appreciate how intelligently he used light and perspectives.



Böcklin's painting was often seen as a symbol for the "German soul" – the contemplative, melancholic, even the "death-yearning" of the German mind were said to be immortalised there. So it's quite fitting that the amateur artist who bought this work of art in 1933 was none other than Adolf Hitler.

Studio Herbrich is a photo studio in Düsseldorf, Germany, with its own post-production facilities and an excellent image archive for special effects, landscapes, skies etc. All models and props are made on the premises. "Is Thomas Herbrich also a melancholic, death-yearning type?" "Only after receiving certain layouts!"

Studio Herbrich **Ottweilerstr. 25** **40476 Düsseldorf** **Tel. 0211 463260**