

TNoA - The Nature of Abstraction

by Jan Holthoff

Introduction

The Nature of Abstraction is a group exhibition which combines 7 artistic positions in abstract-gestural painting from the Rhineland. On display are artists who have dedicated themselves to non-objective painting. Their work moves self-referentially in the field of tension, between the dissolution and development of form. Despite formal precision, the creation process of the paintings remains visible as traces on the canvas. Thus, an affinity to Informalism, Tachism or Abstract Expressionism from the post-war period becomes apparent. However, these references are not directly cited, but rather updated and reflected through contemporary strategies. We find ourselves in times when the individual expression of freedom is threatened by powerful authoritarian control systems and digital availability of individual data and profiles. The kind of painting that favours a subjective gesture therefore mirroring humanistic values of individuality might be an answer. The exhibited works open up a comprehensive vocabulary of formal techniques that achieve textural diversity, especially through the juxtaposition of gestural settings, or the layering of surface effects. Color density and lightness create rhythmically dynamic surfaces that grow out of controlled spontaneity. In this way, in the void in which everything is possible — the unique image, which follows a compelling logic inherent to the work — moves towards the real and formulates its condensed subjective meaning. Painting reflects itself and explores the possibilities of color and form in a sequence of decisions. In the process, the picture and its subject are subjugated to the creation of something new, as well as to memory and time. The works are not images of the absolute or pure present, nor transcendent like the works of Ad Reinhardt or Agnes Martin. The painting process is a spiritual dimension as well as a physical presence, which then dwells in the formulations, solidified, after the paint has dried. The artistic act thus unfolds an existential dimension, since the ego is inescapable and present in every moment. The dramatization of the painting becomes a claim of the subject's existence; it has taken possession of the canvas, tested it again and again, and in the process subjects itself as an entity of expansion and finiteness. The underlying affinity to the world locates the artistic act in the here and now. Calculated concepts in the work process, as well as self-trust in the painting experience, result in works that open up a sensually rich space of experience for the viewer; one which allows the eye to glide from one painterly event to the next. The following paintings will give a first impression of the exhibited positions.

Symposium - „We celebrate gesture“

Immanuel Kant is usually a good partner when it comes to dialogue: "To think of an object and to recognize an object is not the same. For two things belong to perception; first, the concept, by which an object is thought of at all (category), and second, the perception, by which it is given"; from: Critique of Pure Reason. Year, edition, publisher.

Not only is this aptly astute, but it also flatters us painters. How wonderful is this gift from Immanuel Kant: no recognition without contemplation - this sensuality, which means joy for us: the joy of the act of painting in the studio, in which we also overcome the word as thinking painters, in which we forget ourselves in the highest awareness, without losing ourselves, in which we find ourselves again and again and invent ourselves as reverent creators of our culture, and with every brushstroke give birth to the word gesture, already constituted in consciousness at the moment of the first as well as every composition, giving it to us and the world, including you today.

We all, us painters, which I have brought together in this exhibition as curator, seek this material experience, formulate the gesture in its deepest and purest form imaginable, not without virtuosity to help it into the world in our language, our means, the color, with brushes on the canvas. This, our most conservative confession in the best part of 700 years of our culture and of our tradition, in which we join without presumption, but not freely and not without pleasant dispute in it, breaks our silence in a painting, which should already have been declared dead and buried. We know this, we accept it calmly and formulate in every brushstroke, our knowing contradiction and disobedience to postmodernism. This after all, may have been put to rest in the 1990s on Bedford Avenue in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, NYC, as my friend and consort throughout the ages, Ethan Pettit, told me —Pettit, a central figure who formerly went by the name Medea and part of the performance scene in 80's Williamsburg, during the time when the wave was breaking beyond the peak of postmodernism. A postmodernism that still reverberates, that we know about, that we as artists have lived through and absorbed at our academies, and that we now want it to lead

us in our present into a possible future and point us here and now in this project, TNoA, into a future that we want together.

In what was said, we are not only formulating painters of this gesture again and again, which according to the linguist Noam Chomsky is inscribed in our collective mind as a formative category of universal grammar at the moment of our birth as human beings, but also creator and inventor in genius, as master Markus Lüpertz would say, who was my esteemed director in a time and place where I was allowed to abide. "Every man is an artist," said another master by the name of Joseph Beuys and thus gives us all here and now and in this space, here in the Kunstwerk Köln, in Cologne, Germany, this physical and mental place, our genius, to whose sources everyone may penetrate, unfold in it and generate and find his personal place and space. Such a community would please me.

I spoke of the intimate silence in our studios, which belongs only to us painters, which offers us protection, demands respect in the moment of the act of painting, in which the uniqueness of the gesture category is allowed to blossom, in the silence and emptiness, in which everything is still possible, the emptiness, which John Cage also knows in his words, which he wrote down for us in the book "Sound of Silence". Immanuel Kant's words quoted at the beginning of this text, I read once at first sight in this mighty 1011-page book, is not only powerful in spirit and heavy in its physical presence, which in the holding and pondering hand its weight in both senses can already be guessed. A wonderful task therein.

Now on to what is actually meant by Kant about the sensual perception of the cognition-generating gesture category, and which we are addressing ourselves right now! At that time, Kant still belonged to structuralism, which runs as a mental line through our culture and was formulated in the hermeneutics of Hans-Georg Gadamer in his book Truth and Method. This is the basis for all illuminating words and what broke-in the speechlessness of postmodernism, of whose possible burial I have already spoken about.

I am mentally positioned in constructivism, have internalized Werner Heisenberg's insights of quantum physics in thought and painting,

understand and follow the self-reference of Jaques Derrida's signifiers into the self-referentiality of the act of painting, but as the language-seeking host and moderator of this symposium, to our project TNoA, to which I have published a book accompanying it in Kerber Verlag, I must break the silence in order to realize what I wish to dare.

Thoughts on

Laura Aberham

Cultivation of highest consciousness in the moment of painterly decision: very sophisticated dear Laura, congrats. In the cover of TNoA you elevate gesture to the highest portrait, full of elegance, beauty and without kitsch. The not too gentle impression unfolds the floating gesture, a more splendid trace of bristles than figure. You sharpen the indefiniteness and formulate what words are unable to say. To breathe is soothing. In this presence everything is possible. And yet everything just remains a glorious act, unselfconscious, just color, yet still the string of a Jimi Hendrix guitar that swirls the room in sound. You do not make K.O. Götz, whom I admire, look good with our cover picture. In the most wonderful sense, this is an athletic competition with art history.

Ina Gerken

Turning to self-referential expression. You create the complexity of a grammatical structure without pointing into narration - a remarkable point. Many thanks for that. You formulate the pattern-forming function of the mind most personally, thematizing and reflecting it with the means of painting. The color white in the obscuring surfaces of your painting is mysterious, I have been carrying it in my mind for a while. I look into the mirror of emptiness, the Buddhist? - or into the white of the German Raimund Girke, Agnes Martin's desert flower or the U.S. painter Robert Ryman, who sucked the pleasure out of the material color.

Sabine Tress

The process-the serial as a postmodern strategy-brings Andy Warhol to mind. In the act of painting, you unfold the choreography of the image: as author and with bodily tension like that of Pina Bausch or Juschka Weigel. This dance theater I like. Your tagging of the lettering in the

small format of the sketch, your sense for the rhythm of the handwriting, the poetry without semantics, the cipher-like presence of the symbols leads me to Cy Twombly and into the poetic theory of Novalis. The quickly set, but never trivial and never fleeting, always materialized in dense color in the small-format serial studies, which also assert themselves as individual works and exist in space, always leads to a turn toward the single large format. Your works, actually always in the portrait format, bear witness to more effort, struggle and daring. Layer upon layer, your works grow like organisms that seem to ignite a life of their own. They expose and immediately cover again: a back and forth, like a pendulum movement, you become a mystery that is sometimes inscribed and painted again over texts, only poetic inkling of a depth and yet, become spaces of longing which the viewer may direct towards your images.

Jan Kolata

Coffee & cigaret, Jim Jarmusch - a grappa: the heightened sense. It will be a pleasure to experience your thoughtful presence in large format with one's own gaze and not only appreciate it on Instagram. I would like to denote the history of your early landscapes, which were not yet part of the work. These origins do connect. May I still sense the landscape in your gestures? The coloring may testify and also rank your images in the great tradition of the Impressionists, perhaps, pointing through the present into the future. Joy sets in, I think of jazz, maybe the improvised sound play of a clarinet or an alto saxophone. I am at the light, the inner glow, the organic guides, flowers rise pleasantly in my mind. Ingenious response to postmodern denial, not the intimate objectivity of a Gerhard Richter flower still life. I love the fine choice of colors. You investigate the process wordlessly, no scientist in it, with your sparring partner of the image area you search for ways of colour to take shape. The chromium oxide is great, I like the Payne's Grey when painting. How nice it is to rub the pigment on the glass into the white primer.

Max Frintrop

Painting as a sensitive finding in the virtuoso large format. A few decisive settings, and the painting sits with intuitive knowledge of the material. The chemical coloring of your paintings claims many a collector, as you have told me. I thought Sam Francis would appeal to you, he does, but

Morris Louis is probably a closer match for you - at the moment. Everything romantic must be conquered and defended against the experience of the absurd in painting and doubts. Per Kirkeby was rather avoided by you in the past. And yet you are now looking for a way to depict natural depths. I would like to follow this, I also followed this dialogue once, in a different way and at the same time not. Fractal, self-similar color gradients blossom in the casual calculation of gestural self-formulation: apple man, Mandelbrot set, scream of a butterfly - the chaos theory.

Becker Schmitz

Pop, punk and subculture - blue jacket with red socks: Dude. You come from spraying and cultivate graffiti. Appropriation of urban space, the assertion of your existence. Your presence on the street, in the park reveals yourself, your presence, that as information in the fading trace of the subject, becomes fragmented, weathering. And you go beyond. You point the way for the panel into our digital present, reflecting and enlivening in enchantment this analog and virtual interface. I look forward to the spaces your keen sense and poetic installation will reveal to us.