

Interview Konstantin Bayer with Stefan Schiek out of the catalogue "Grund" on the occasion of the solo exhibition at Gallery Eigenheim Berlin from September 24th – October 25th 2015.

K. Bayer: How did you get involved in painting?

S.Schiek: I started in Barcelona.

K. Bayer: When did you stay in Barcelona?

S.Schiek: During the years 1999 and 2000.

K. Bayer: Did you do an exchange semester there?

S.Schiek: Yes, I spent there one year, sharing an apartment with Gerard, a Spanish architect who painted – painted a lot. We visited a paint shop which looked like an old pharmacy but instead of medicines the wooden cupboards were full of different pigments, entirely full of pigments. Fascinating.

K. Bayer: Do you still work today with pigments?

S.Schiek: No, but when I was using them then I mixed everything myself.

K. Bayer: Do you still have any paintings from that time?

S.Schiek: No, I gave them all away as gifts.

K. Bayer: Was it there in Spain that you developed your reductive minimalist aesthetic that was already visible in your silkscreen prints from 2003?

K. Bayer: It was a little different. First came the city landscapes, however I also actually employed reduction in them. Even at art lessons at high school it was always about colour; colour and surface.

K. Bayer: Did you have any role models back then? When browsing your bookshelf a few books from which references to your current paintings could be derived catch the eye. Which books and artists did you concentrate your attention on?

S.Schiek: I actually discovered other painters relatively late, excluding of course the classic names which you always come into contact with. At the time my focus was directed more towards philosophical reading that related to my studies: Foucault, Derrida, Flusser, Adorno, Nietzsche and Borges.

K. Bayer: How did you come to your reductive minimalist approach through these philosophers? Was there a relationship evident between their writing and the artistic form you developed?

S.Schiek: Perhaps. In the beginning it was always a question of what I wanted to paint. The search for an idea, so to speak. With this quest I occupied myself a lot at the start: what could I

paint that reflected my ideas in a way perhaps never seen before.

K. Bayer: Is there anything that has been going along with you? Are there any guidelines that currently lead your interest?

S.Schiek: This changed over time of course but Jorge Luis Borges still accompanies me, even as it became more independent.

K. Bayer: What is the matter with Borges?

S.Schiek: He was an Argentinian, a citizen of the world, a bookworm. For a long time he lived in Switzerland and was the director of the Library in Buenos Aires for a period. He published many metaphysical texts, primarily short stories but also poetry. His work is charged with cross references to other literature, literary history, culture, and the knowledge that mankind has acquired and this is connected with the paintings. Especially with the figurative ones.

K. Bayer: Do the figurative paintings need to be separated from the abstract paintings? Stripe paintings and narrative paintings, is there a link?

S.Schiek: The link is the paint. It's as much about paint in the figurative paintings as it is in the stripe paintings. It is all about the process, the material. That what happens in the studio. With most of the paintings this is no longer visible at the end of the process. Especially not with the figurative paintings - another series leaves this production process of layering and grinding open; *Warpaintings* show the physical process undertaken in the studio. Similarly the drip paintings from the *Candy* series are an artistic release free of planning or knowledge of how the painting will look afterwards.

K. Bayer: That was my question concerning the challenging of painting. You are working little in terms of characteristic style and gesture, which are expressed in other paintings, to put the inspiration of just a single moment on canvas. Did you miss this with your figurative paintings, the impulsiveness of your actions?

S.Schiek: No, I definitely don't miss the impulsiveness. I was interested in doing something different, in trying something different which is still possible. The works are often highly fixated on the material because of the high gloss enamel paint and there it is one goal to push borders, to see what is feasible, what you can do, what you are free to do with the paint, for example if you are using it in a way reversed to how it is intended to be used.

K. Bayer: You often have a triangular relationship between place, event and protagonist. That's the basic structure of a narrative. Where did this interest come from? It appears as if there's also a scientific interest in your paintings because the people depicted always appear to be saving or retrieving something in natural environments or landscapes. For example shovelling something from a black hole in the forest. Where do you get your motifs for something like this? Did it originate from the way current affairs are portrayed in the media?

S.Schiek: The motifs partly have their origin in the media, in images that may seem familiar. But the series is primarily focused on something more universal. Man is always in search of

something, navigating a path of discovery and development. That is the distinguishing trait of man. Ideas and activism are always present. When the ideas are there it is eventually possible to implement them, or it is made possible. My reference to nature and representation of nature is like the serpent in paradise. *Avalanche* shows a beautiful winter landscape which is, however, about to be buried under an avalanche. This is the representation of nature like the snake in paradise.

K. Bayer: Do you see this more as a problem or a solution facing us? The destruction of nature, I mean. Do you think mankind is at a dead end?

S.Schiek: I don't think in such categories at all. I rather think that such things happen. Mankind is a part of nature, too. What is occurring appears to be human nature. I don't see it as a problem or a solution, but as a steady development. Therefore, the paintings don't offer a solution. It's exactly what I meant earlier: activism is represented as process and development, human development.

K. Bayer: Moving to the title of the exhibition: *GRUND* (German for "ground", as well as "reason"). The reference to painting, to the surface to which the paint is applied to in layers, and as we just spoke about it, the reason for human activity, a universal activity, reasons which are given to man...

S.Schiek: Of course there is also the question about one's reason to paint – about the artist's drive to paint at all.

K. Bayer: Isn't that a question of motivation depending on the painting? Putting the energy into a new motif?

S.Schiek: *GRUND* is just a good title because it is also simultaneously a good question to which there is no immediate response.

K. Bayer: Are there other aspects that this title underpins?

S.Schiek: Yes, it is also the ground on which one stands on - like a grounding. In this sense painting is a very grounding affair. The act of painting grounds the artist, leads him back to the origin because he is alone with himself and his work. It is leading you there automatically, you are entering a special state, a very grounded state.

K. Bayer: When you speak of colour, in *The Basics* and *Noon* yellow is quite dominant. As we hung the show you also mentioned that you like using yellow. Let's talk a bit about colour choice. Do you reach impulsively for colours or do you already have an idea of what you will choose in your head?

S.Schiek: In reality I buy a lot of different paint in one go so that my colour selection is more or less fixed, like in a fashion collection. The exception of course being when I need a special colour for a particular reason. When I buy so much paint I think to myself: this is how it is going to look like next year – it is a kind of mood. When working with the paint, especially with the acrylic paint, the consistency still captivates me. Opening a new can is akin to the feeling of a childhood birthday. The colours pop, they are very intense and the slightly viscous consistency always continues to inspire me.

- K. Bayer: It's interesting that you've developed some kind of fashions for yourself.
- S.Schiek: In terms of my colour choices there isn't any scientific approach - it is all a gut decision. In the beginning it was much more fixed, but not anymore. This change just seemed to happen. I've now been doing it for such a long time, I don't have to intellectualise my colour choice like I used to when I started out. It was the same with what to paint. There used to be this process of searching for an idea of what I wanted to paint, of what I wanted to say. This has developed a life of its own, which I enjoy, because it feels good that you don't have to think about it anymore but rather the things are coming to you. The subject matter comes to me, I no longer have to look for it or construct it, it just happens. It's exactly the same with the colours, too. There's normally a base idea, for example in *Coppice* the colours had to be beautifully bleak in a way. These are however more atmospheric ideas. Naturally, I've got ideas; that the background needs to be dark, for example, that it is tone on tone, the green, the trees, tones which are so similar that they are no longer clearly discernible but merge into one another.
- K. Bayer: There's one painting that comes to my mind as an outlier: *Parallel*. It is, content-wise, a different type of search, the archaic within man, the image of the right to exist, this searching, the uncertainty, which you raised to a whole new level. Can you decode the painting because it doesn't fit so well in this whole context for me.
- S.Schiek: *Parallel* is a hybrid of many things I've tried out. The idea was to accommodate as many of these elements as possible: geometric forms, smoothed skies, people. There are also new elements: people who don't distance themselves, who suddenly stop, who are cut or frayed. That's why there's also this god-like Zeus mechanic portrayed.
- K. Bayer: Why exactly? Because you tried to bring everything together with this painting? Or the novelty which appears in all your works, from painting to painting? You'll need to explain the connection to Zeus to me once more.
- S.Schiek: Symbolically the figure stands before the repetitive geometric form with this bar to unite everything as the creator, like a gateway to another dimension that should be penetrated. On the one instance the bar doesn't come out on the other side, in another instance it does – so he's managed to penetrate this other dimension on at least one occasion and other times not.
- K. Bayer: Very interesting. This always floated in another cosmos for me, too. There was a lot of mythology there, no longer so connected to humans but elevated beyond that sort of subject matter. That's why it's so important to hear this background information to get the full view of the sphere that creates this absoluteness. Mankind with his mythical beliefs that determine both cultures and actions. Now I understand it better.
- S.Schiek: Obviously this also plays a part, it is about something that lies further behind or something that forms a deeper reason. It is about the small wheels which continue turning inside, it is an attempt to render understandable something incredibly great.
- K. Bayer: The reason for the title of *Déjà-vu* is still unclear to me. *The Basics* is clear; they are the base colours. *Warpaintings* depict the struggle with the ground, colour and style. As an

abstract painting *Noon* has this idea of the canopy, a hybrid of abstract and figurative. Your *Warscapes* were also hybrids where you have associated landscapes with abstraction. But why *Déjà-vu*?

K. Bayer: *Déjà-vu* is simultaneously a doubling and a continuation. The gate is repeated but the vertical lines direct themselves away.

Konstantin: So can we deduce it like this: because of the doubling in one realisation and hence *Déjà-vu*.

K. Bayer: Yes, but this painting is also incorporating more perspectives, and creating more vanishing points. It seems as if the lines are continually moving. The viewer's gaze never rests, it is instead constantly directed to different points. I wanted to create a depth that isn't actually there.

K. Bayer: I can understand that, that's a very good picture. Here you're bringing together both: the techniques of the drip paintings and the surface of the figurative ones, as the surface here seems quite different. It's a homogenous surface that depicts the attitude of the drip painting. It seems rather taped and constructed, it no longer has this randomness.

S.Schiek: In the early stages there was a randomness, but the more I developed the painting, the more I interfered with the strip to make it how I wanted – the thickness and consistency. But it's not completely designed or created, rather the contrary: There doesn't even exist a preliminary sketch.

K. Bayer: It's also a repetition, a junction of perspectives because it's a hybrid of figurative painting and abstract drip painting. Do you see a transition between the formal struggle with your work and the narrative you are introducing? Do you also want to tell a story with the title *Déjà-vu*? The universal, which is always centred around itself, the human being, the rediscovery of patterns. Is there a point of reference for this painting?

S.Schiek: Sure, but first and foremost it's about colour, form and space. It's a totally playful approach. It's a continuation of previous forms from the drip paintings but with added design options that help to move the painting in the direction I want it to go. It is also primarily a landscape painting. It was my intention to create a landscape. How can you represent landscape or space differently? How can you create space using only lines? This was my pivotal question and goal with this work.

K. Bayer: It has become such a homogeneous work. The virtuosity of the painting consistently evokes calmness, it does not seem agitated at all.

S.Schiek: Yes, I also find it interesting that simultaneously the lines dance before your eyes, yet it has a calming effect, like standing in an enchanted forest. The colours should have an enchanting aspect, a friendliness about them.

K. Bayer: Even though some of the colours are very bright in tone, it is in harmony as a whole.

S.Schiek: Yes, the colours themselves are very bright, but they cancel themselves out and create a pleasant unity.

K. Bayer: Where do you see the complexity in *Shaft*, because the painting really interests me. Is there a story behind it like *Parallel* or *Déjà-vu*?

S.Schiek: It just turned out well, almost too well. It is so coherent and harmonious, everything fits, it is almost too harmonious for me, it functions well with the proportions and colours. For example the pit is tiny.

K. Bayer: A burrow.

S.Schiek: Really just a black square.

K. Bayer: It's this harmony that you create in your paintings, I also really like *Schacht*.

S.Schiek: Tell me why!

K. Bayer: Just like you said, it's a harmony that builds up in these paintings, in each painting, which you achieve primarily by compositional means. The colours are totally homogenous in Coppice but in *Parallel* it is really confusing. *Black Hole* really stirs me as a viewer purely because of its over exaggeration, but in *Shaft* the colours are more downplayed, more saturated.

S.Schiek: *Shaft* is a highlight for me in this series, which I've been working on since 2010: the disaster, accident and discovery series is something I wanted to present in a way that's quite delectable.

K. Bayer: Candy like. Sorry for bringing the word pop into the game.

S.Schiek: Please don't.

K. Bayer: But it's an attempt at glorification – to make something negative buttery soft.

S.Schiek: Yes, that was one objective, and therefore it needs to become more confusing again.

K. Bayer: This shows your process of development though. When you've found your form it's natural to want to become a virtuoso. There are so many intervening years between *Icehead* and *The Basics* here in the entrance, works that I find so harmonious.

S.Schiek: It continues to amaze me how multifaceted the works are. I recognise a common theme that you can see throughout the complete works over the last ten years, even though I've been engaged with so many other different themes too.

K. Bayer: When you look back on the last ten years, what have been the outliers?

S.Schiek: There were so many different concepts. Firstly, how can you create a portrait which contains as little pictorial information as possible? These totally plane works, where nothing is discernible apart from patches of paint which finally bring out a face. Then there was the plant phase, which means the reduction of organic forms to a level where only

basic forms are recognisable, or patterns which appear again and again. This led me to the question of how our brain, our awareness works. Then, I started to paint synapses, synapses magnified under a magnifying glass which makes them look plant-like again because everything developed from a single origin.

K. Bayer: Matter.

S.Schiek: Then at some point that was no longer enough for what I wanted to say. So the figures emerged in my work in order to present more complex ideas. But I'm not telling any stories in the classical sense, there isn't any concrete story playing itself out in the paintings such as the decapitation of this and that. You don't know exactly what's happening. It's not a particular narrative but a reference to something larger that lies beyond, which is perhaps being told. I could also paint waste in the forest but it's not about that, that's just a small part of the theme.

K. Bayer: So to make a generalisation, your work is about form and content.

S.Schiek: Yes, the representation of a very complex situation by completely reducing it, that's the point. Concerning all these noble demands of oneself and one's work a nice fable crossed my mind: A painter wants to paint the entire cosmos in a single work. To this end he is standing directly in front of the canvas, constantly painting. When he thinks he is finished he takes a few steps back to look at his work. And what does he see?

K. Bayer: No idea.

S.Schiek: Himself.

K. Bayer: Thank you for the interview.