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Highly glossed.

On Stefan Schiek's paintings

Painting is an artistic *métier* that can no longer be taken for granted today – despite the fact that there are numerous young artists again who want to paint and also do so. The reasons have to do with the long history of painting, with the famous and less famous treatises on painting since the Renaissance, the role of photography as a visual medium since the mid- 19th century and with all the “last paintings” that were made in the 20th century. Can a painter just ignore the impact of such an icon of Classic Modernism as Kazimir Malevich’s “Black Square” (1915)? The painting was conceived as an assertion of the absolute, the quasi-divine, the unsurpassable – but even so Malevich continued to paint afterwards. Slightly earlier, now a century ago, Marcel Duchamp ended his by all means successful career as a cubo-futuristic painter, got a job as a librarian and played chess with enthusiasm. Also considered a classic today is the avant-garde programme of Bauhaus artist László Moholy-Nagy, which he set out between 1923 and 1926 but didn’t publish until 1936 under the title “vom pigment zum licht (From Pigment to Light)”. His perspective was that the path of modernism had to lead from creators with pigments (the painters) to artists who saw themselves as designers of the optical and experimented with big light machines. Some years after the Second World War, Ad Reinhardt created his “Black Paintings” in New York (these were ultimate “last paintings” too, accompanied by clever, ironically to paradoxically worded treatises on art), in which he soon allowed himself formal variations only in tiny, albeit homeopathic doses. To the pathos of announcing respective last paintings, be it in the name of the Russian, German or US-American avant-garde, the Pop artists in the 1960s replied with more or less drastic strategies of reintegrating their paintings into everyday life, dominated by the illustrated world of stars and starlets, popular ideals of beauty and the omnipresent aesthetics of advertising. Today we know erased drawings, various painting bans and so-called Bad Painting – all of them the consequence of the spiral, set in motion around the turn of the 20th century, of the constant re-evaluation of any aesthetic values. Hardly had a new artistic vocabulary with its new doctrines been established than a new one appeared on the horizon, the freshest, clamouring to reach a supra-individual consensus on its very own doctrines. Never before in the history of European art have the respective innovators, the avant-garde, been declared backward and reactionary by their contemporary rivals and successors as rapidly as

in the last 150 years. What has been set free is an enormous potential for free choice both for artists and their audience, but also of insecurity.

Can there even be a contemporary alternative to the accelerating repudiation of all the kinds of good advice on good, proper, absolute or final painting that we have come to know since Leonardo da Vinci's sketchbooks? Are all forms of painting today nothing but an obsession with tradition, nostalgia, or simply the reproduction of methods and artistic stances that already existed long before our time? These questions make painting today appear as an act that is no longer self-evident (authenticated by tradition), that needs explaining, justifying. Why still paint today? After all, there are plenty of machine-assisted techniques for creating pictures, which are easier to handle (and cheaper to get). Actually, it is astonishing that in this context today there still are – and more than ever, it seems – young artists who dedicate themselves to what, over centuries, has been called painting – although techniques such as grattage, using spatulas and squeegees, carving, scratching and glueing, rolling, spraying and spilling paint (and not just paint) often no longer have much to do with the traditional understanding of painting, manipulating paintbrushes on wooden panels or canvasses. Those who (still) paint today do not engage in the either-or, in debates on fundamental principles. What rules is the pragmatism of the “even so”, which feels free in choosing its models; which aims for the small spaces that are still left between long staked-out artistic claims, developing a sensibility for subtleties, details and nuances; which insists on making its own experiences, instead of studying art history. The results prove them right, the young pragmatists of today: despite a highly self-contradictory and at the same time overly powerful tradition, despite the increasing speed in passing from one avant-gardism to another and the impression of the observer that everything that seems conceivable must already have been painted, they still happen, the genuine acts of painting that surprise us, authentic endeavours and gripping ‘story-telling’ in the painted medium, a continuing vitality of this art form in the 21st century. There appears to be a paradox here: while painting today can barely be considered a self-evident artistic practice, many of its practitioners appear completely unimpressed by the thought, utterly self-assured.

Stefan Schiek belongs to those young pragmatists who did not spend much time on self-doubt and self-questioning, but got down to work. He studied Media Design and Fine Arts at Bauhaus-University Weimar and graduated in 2002. Since then Stefan Schiek has been painting, calmly and persistently, year after year. From the very beginning he was curious about the visual power of vivid colours and clear contours,

especially how flatness and depth correspond in the border area between the figurative and the abstract, how flat compositions tend to form silhouettes and ornaments whose effect often goes far beyond the message of the figural subjects. An age-old theme that has been interpreted by artists through the centuries in a number of different ways. For a long time spatial illusionism – the creation of the optical illusion of depth while painting on flat supports – was considered the high art of painters, who thus committed themselves to truth to nature (in seeing): the painting as a window to the (imaginatively composed, pictorially constructed) universe, as an element of the contemplation of the world. In the 19th century, however, this assumption was increasingly confronted with new questions and answers, produced by the impressionists and the post-impressionists, by Vincent van Gogh, Paul Gauguin and finally, systematically, flanked by probing reflections, by Paul Cézanne. His credo was that besides the narrative truth of the figuration there is a truth of the canvas – which is flat. He wanted both truths to be perceptually combined through the relations of colours and the gradation between light and dark. A sense of depth was to be created without the usual illusionist tricks. Cézanne's mental and painted solutions to the aesthetic interaction between flatness and depth, and the solutions that Pablo Picasso, Henri Matisse and Fernand Léger later found, are well-known – as is the work of the generations of artists that followed, including those adaptations of popular visual culture that characterize the oeuvre of Roy Lichtenstein, Alex Katz and Julien Opie.

Stefan Schiek collects motifs from contemporary mass media, from magazines, brochures, catalogues, advertising and the internet, which capture his attention. Sometimes he uses his own camera to record visual impressions which speak to him because of the harmony in the way their parts relate to one another, because of their intense visual aura or of the way they correspond with images of the ideal. For years this preference for beautiful shapes dominated his choices – be it elegant women or men, the variously formed silhouettes of leaves, blossoms or branches or impressive alpine landscapes with traditional huts. In 2009, however, paintings began to appear with groups of figures which might have been modeled on pictures in civil protection or disaster management manuals. With these group paintings Stefan Schiek appears to have left the terrain of visually attractive and popular subjects, leaving us instead with mixed feelings. He further increases the ambivalent effect of these new subjects by embedding the groups of people in the already familiar boldly coloured, surreally beautiful environments, placing them before ornamented backgrounds or even in the

middle of abstract compositions. In such conflicting constellations, the reasons and goals of the people involved can hardly be established any more.

The figural elements – people, their clothes, tools, houses, landscapes – that Stefan Schiek adopts from various sources, he subjects, by drawing and painting them, to a temporal and spatial decontextualisation and a formal generalization: he limits the elements creating depth and space and figural details, eliminates surface texture and shades of colour, reduces inner contours to make large shapes with marked outlines, simplifies or erases faces' features, leaves out all modulations between light and shadow that normally structure our ways of seeing. He transforms the shimmering colours of the source pictures into monochrome colour planes with approximately equal intensity, thereby heightening the effect of flatness for each composition even further. The result of the transformation is obvious: the paintings appear homogenous in depth and colour, forms seem stylised to ornamental and closely interwoven – indeed the impression is close to that of traditional tapestry. But connections can also be made to 19th-century Japanese multicolour woodblock prints (ukiyo-e), to the European Art Nouveau that way inspired by the Far East, to Pop artists such as Tom Wesselmann and their successors such as Alex Katz.

In a group of works that he created from 2005, Stefan Schiek enlarged, isolated and abstracted natural subjects such as branches and clouds to the point at which non-representational planar compositions of planes with organoid contours emerged. His interest in abstracting and stylising natural motifs led to forms that can also be associated with military camouflage patterns. One might be reminded of Andy Warhol, who, however, modelled his silkscreen-painted camouflage designs (1986), which he varied in terms of colour and form, directly on military use. The all-over structure of this flat pattern that has no centre and potentially no limits seemed particularly suitable for transforming natural motifs into biomorphic abstractions. Similar abstract configurations had already been the result of Hans Arp's work with reliefs made of eccentrically cut wooden panels in monochrome colours, made in Zurich during World War One. Other paintings by Stefan Schiek give the impression of magnified plan views of coloured liquids that run down a smooth surface. Rarely does he let the paint run as it wants, such as in his "Großes Blutbild (Big Blood Picture)" in 2007; usually he prefers to control its course. Often he forces it into vertical lines, such as in his "Warpaintings" or the "Candy" paintings. As said before, in Stefan Schiek's work we encounter the figural only in varying degrees of abstraction, especially in strongly stylised and silhouetted forms – never in a way

that would correspond, even to the slightest degree, to the ways we see the world. With his paintings he evokes an other world, a beautiful but also artificial world with its own rules, harmoniously proportioned, operating with strong signals in terms of colour.

The paintings' strongest and most immediate effect, however, lies in their material quality. Stefan Schiek works with industrially made, high-gloss coloured enamel on primed MDF or aluminium sheets. There are only a few places which show that he paints the enamel on with a brush – mostly the observer is confronted with glossy, intensely luminous planes of colour in which all traces of manual work have been wiped out. In the process of creation the artist applies up to fifteen coats of enamel, partially sands them down again, reapplies them. Depending on the thickness and the number of the coats, the surface of the painting forms slight reliefs along the contours of the figures. When looked at from an angle, the edges of these reliefs become visible as an element in the organisation of the picture, as a particular spatial effect which emphasizes the tendency to a stylised figuration. A number of transparent finishing coats conclude the process, seal off the underlying coats and give each painting a glossy surface in which its surroundings are reflected. We are used to technical appliances, cars or high-quality design objects having a high-gloss finish, but not paintings. The light reflections tend to interfere with the paintings' perception. The bold, graphic colours and the stylised flatness of the figures relativize the pictorial presence of the paintings' subjects. Conversely, the use of glossy enamel gives the paintings an object-like appearance – an observation made when looking at the originals, not their reproductions. The paintings tend towards fetishisation; they might strike one as desirable things, cool designer objects – unrivalled in their glossy colourfulness – with which to set the tone in modern interiors. Into this subtle drift towards the precious, the beautiful subjects – the flowers and branches, perfect bodies and faces, biomorphic abstractions – fit perfectly. The aura, the quiet presence of the motifs, is further heightened by the material execution in glossy enamel. The strongest aesthetic appeal of these paintings indeed exudes from their particular material and physical presence. This presence does far more than to carry pictorial messages: it can only be created by the form of painting described above; it cannot be replaced by any other medium. Is there a more conclusive answer to the question pertaining to the relevance of painting in contemporary art?

The group paintings, however, cannot easily be ranked in this category of attractive, quiet motifs with an aesthetically emphasized physical presence. They are disturbing because their content cannot be subsumed under the high-gloss appearance of their outer form. People in full protection suits have a picnic on a red and white checked square, letting small balloons rise into an indefinable atmosphere strangely saturated with colours. Other figures in full protection find a small box whose contents are seemingly not to be trusted. A fireman with oxygen bottles on his back gazes at the centre of a brilliantly, colourfully flashing explosion as if this were a romantic contemplation of the setting sun. Two men before a paradisiacal backdrop examine some spots of black rain; others carry an injured man across a border or themselves move beyond a hazard tape. Still others, wearing full protection suits and carrying torches and detectors, appear to be examining a suspect-seeming source. A speech bubble comes from the figure standing in the background: we read the word "positive...". In this context the word does not mean "good", but rather refers to the results of a scientific examination: something has been tested as "being present". Everything else would have been "n.a.d." – nothing abnormal detected. But the patient, Earth, is ill; her most beautiful manifestations may be poisoned. A diagnosis that fits the spirit of the age: anxiety as the subtext of our highly civilized, scientifically disenchanting present that has been optimized in many respects. Danger as the aftertaste of our savouring a life of affluence.

In the group paintings Stefan Schiek evokes a beautiful, desirable world which nonetheless is contaminated by the feeling of insecurity. There is a range of associations available among the ecological disasters of the last few years: the ozone hole, climate change, exploding oil rigs, leaking gamma radiation in Chernobyl and Fukushima. The motifs of the group paintings form rather a big contrast with the paintings' aesthetic appeal, the coherence they exude, their perfect glossy finish; but they also form a contrast with the other motifs that celebrate the elegance of form in many variations. Still, the darkly foreboding or catastrophic group paintings belong in Stefan Schiek's work as a whole, since they function as pointers which, once they have been perceived by the observer, colour the other, the beautiful motifs with different emotions: nothing is as evident, as certain as it seems. There are things that escape our will for form. Through the group paintings, the ambition for a coherent, complete formation, articulated symbolically through the artistic transformation of people and nature into elegant, stylised images, is shaken. The luminous colours and glossy surfaces, as enticingly beautiful as they may seem, shouldn't be trusted.

