

## **Karl Schawelka**

### The artistic world of Stefan Schiek

Stefan Schiek does not simply paint pictures. The artist has created his own typology of characters and situations that range from the everyday to the sinister. The observer is drawn into a fascinating fusion of fantasy and reality. At a first glance the paintings appear cheerful and friendly, but gradually – the more one allows oneself to become involved – disturbing traits appear that stay bothersome long after turning one's back on them. Something continues to work within, even when one thinks one has fully understood a painting and can now turn one's mind to what comes next. Technical, formal and content-related elements or procedures work together to cause this irritation.

In technical terms: Stefan Schiek uses standard industrial enamels on MDF or an aluminium support. His works appear smooth, clean, almost machine-made, as befits these industrial paints which are intended for spraying or immersion. This is obviously an object that was painstakingly produced. The surfaces – sealed with one or more finishing coatings of clear varnish – seem polished. Irresistible the impulse to touch them. But on moving a step closer, one notices that the colours have a varying thickness. Their supposed immateriality proves to be an illusion. For one thing, the physical presence of the paintings' support works in this direction. (His preference for paintings in portrait format, two metres high, enforces the impression that we are dealing with a counterpart of human proportions.) But more importantly: the surface of his paintings forms a kind of micro-relief. In contrast to Andy Warhol, for example, who was one of the first to use modern, immaterial silk-screen printing ink on canvas, in Schiek's work the materiality of the new, industrial enamel paint becomes visible.

The structure of the applications of colour is by no means as technically smooth and anonymous as it seemed at first. Even streaking – which happens when the surface starts drying before the underlying coats have set, and which is carefully avoided in technical contexts – is used expressively. And the style of the hand-made is apparent in other ways, too. A good dozen coats are applied on top of each other, then partly sanded down again, applied and sanded down once more, etc. As with a Sgraffito, this allows one a sort of archaeologist's view of the process of creation. This technique is used especially to simulate natural processes such as a cloudy sky or

snow-covered landscapes. But the time-consuming layering of paint makes the paintings unusually vivid. Not just the gloss of the surface but also the subtle changeant effects – depending on the observer’s point of view and movement – serve to create an endless interplay. Most of all it is the reflections that captivate the recipient, especially those in which one sees oneself observing.

In formal terms: Schiek’s works are immediately recognizable. The colours and shapes and his particular way of representing objects – they are very much his own. He always uses a limited number of strong, smoothly applied colours reminiscent of comic strips; but in contrast to the comics, his colours occur in select shades. Each painting consists of a few clearly separated flat elements. Even in patterned planes the elements of the pattern can be easily distinguished. There is barely any modelling of light and shadow. One might be reminded of the cloisonnism of the Nabis or of Matisse, or more generally of the development of classic modernist painting, which committed itself to flatness. Like in these paintings, black outlines often separate the shapes, which rarely have inner contours.

Still, Schiek’s works contain spatial effects that counteract the flatness. For one thing, there is a battle between the perception of the picture support in its materiality and the perception of the depicted virtual reality. Besides that, lines drawn as if with a T-square also suggest a perspectival sense of space which creates a conflictual tension with other means of creating depth, such as staggering, overlap and three-dimensionality that is given by a representational reading. That is especially because the straight lines themselves – this is comparable to de Chirico – barely ever allow for a conclusive reading of space. In the painting “The House” (2009) there is not just a contrast between the flat amorphous forms of the landscape and ominous sky – both painted a night-time grey – and the geometrically clear house – painted a bright red – that gives it its title: the dark green foreground, which follows the house’s vanishing lines, makes the house appear to be hovering over an abyss. “The Road” (2010) shows a man in the foreground, paving a road. Before him the stones are ordered geometrically, behind him they are piled in an irregular heap. Still, perspectival lines or rays emerge from both lots of stones, covering the entire landscape like the schematic grids of American cities; but rather than creating the impression of deep space in the background, they form a flat, immaterial light effect, reminiscent of Feininger.

When looking at the artist’s formal language one tends to think of copies of photographs that have been digitally manipulated and reduced. The physical reality that he shows has always been developed from drawings, however. The layered

formation, which is reminiscent of panel paintings from the Late Middle Ages, does not really allow for later changes and requires a strictly conceptual approach. The style of drawing that he chooses becomes especially apparent in his treatment of negative spaces, which work against an easy reading of figure and ground. The vibrant colours with their specially sought tones – among whom the treatment of yellow is particularly remarkable – start out by seeming inviting; but Schiek denies us the pleasure of a harmonious line. The serpent in paradise can already be sensed from a distance and before starting to decipher the representational elements of the picture.

In terms of content: Whereas what Gauguin and Matisse created with their formal and iconographic means was an unspoilt, paradisiacal world in which a blending into an unalienated landscape of our longing seems possible, Schiek does not spare us a world in which ominous catastrophes happen: natural disasters, wars, violent disputes. This most strongly applies, of course, to the group of catastrophe paintings. There are multiple ones of men with protective helmets, suits and gloves, oxygen bottles, in full working gear or with military connotations. An ominous red button or just such a box suggest a nameless threat. A landscape is cordoned off with hazard tape, crossed only by men in protection suits. A cheerful picnic accompanied by balloons can apparently only take place with the help of gas masks on a delimited chessboard-like area that sticks out into an infinite space full of poisonous vapours. Even the word “positive” in the work entitled “Source” (2012) – Schiek sometimes adopts the speech bubbles familiar from comic strips – is given the opposite meaning by the context. Positive results do not bode positively, but rather indicate that a contamination has been discovered. In the work “The Border” two men carry a third. Strange that there should be three boundary posts. We have night scenarios not just in “Night Shift”, “Contact” and “Source”, but also when the woods turn the day to night, such as in “Clearing” (all works from 2012).

It is not that the figures are marked out as dangerous. Quite the opposite: they try to help. They put themselves at risk. They take samples, analyse, gauge, clean up and take care of the dead and the injured. Still, however absorbed they are by their tasks, they too seem helpless, out of their depth and at the mercy of the disaster. As observers we see the futility of their efforts better than they do. They do not understand that more powerful forces are at work. The world in which they operate no longer is a world in which everything is all right.

But the latent threat is never put into concrete terms, so that we might be able to identify the place, time, circumstances or people involved. Rather, we are dealing

with a mythical constellation. Despite references to the pictures in our heads, which have been put there by recent environmental disasters such as Fukushima, this is about something more general. Humans are not just a part of nature any longer: they change it and must constantly deal with the unwelcome consequences of their actions. Reminding us of the fate of Sisyphus, the priority lies with calling attention to general human striving and failure, not accusing particular people in positions of responsibility. Comments on the politics of the day are not intended. The figures in the paintings are not attempting to establish contact with the observer. Schiek's lapidary, epitaph-like titles emphasize this tendency towards the general, as does the fact that he refrains from individualizing his figures.

Like the early Goya, with whom a light-hearted genre can be turned around and a tragic experience come to light, Schiek likes to show that appearances can be deceptive. For example there is a "Sunset" (2010) which has a magnificent play of colours, but is reminiscent of an accident in a chemical factory. Any connotation of merry child's play in his 2010 painting of "Bubbles" rising from a black hole in the ground is lost due to the two sewerage workers. Paradise is artificial and, despite its enticing beauty, rather dangerous. Even the landscapes evoke a latent, intangible menace. In the diptych "Glade" (2009), for example, already the choice of yellow and black – colours signifying danger – suggests a sinister sense of alarm. The rays are more reminiscent of radiation than of life-giving sun. We prefer to trust the house, the hut – the man-made elements in the Landscapes – to protect us from nature. "The Hut" (2011) inspires more confidence than the saccharine rosy dawn. The terms "natural" and "artificial" have swapped meanings. Even "The Beach" (2012) apparently can only be used for a family outing when safely wrapped up in winter clothes. The diptych "Silver Lining" (2009) with its two very thin yellow lines was developed from the artist's experience of a train trip at night-time. It is easy to understand how, because of the speed, the points of light as well as lighter and darker areas turn into streaks. Light, medium and dark grey bands of different widths extend horizontally – or occasionally disturbed by slight slants – over both wings. The two panels are not absolutely identical either, as can be seen by the way they join in the middle. Some of the light grey bands are slightly toned towards beige and thus create a connection to the aforementioned yellow bands, which can be assumed to be the silver lining that gives the work its title. What remains open is whether that is a mirage or a signal of hope. The reference to German Romanticism and to Caspar David Friedrich in particular is a given, despite the very different

artistic methods. Friedrich also likes to suggest something "lying behind", to which he can really only do justice via failure.

This work leads on to the two series, the "Warpaintings" and the "Candies". In the "Warpaintings", the topic of wilful destruction, failure in painting or rather art is addressed, a Romantic motif that is known to play an important part in C. D. Friedrich's work. Layered bands of paint that runs down in rivulets or stripes are sanded down. Natural processes such as the paint's blooming, diffusion and coagulation become visible that way. The separation of binder and pigment, as the enamel flows out on the plane, leads to delicate ramifications that are reminiscent of Wols, art informel or Morris Louis. But the point is not to lovingly follow such natural processes. Instead the Nietzschean principle of "destroying to create" applies. One might think of Raymond Hains and his series of torn posters here. The layers, having been laid bare by the aggressive act of sanding down, are not simply exposed in their uncontrollable beauty, but directly sealed with clear varnish and thereby preserved and killed off in equal measure. This process of reversal does not result in a grey mishmash, however, but serves to enhance the two antagonistic processes. Often the picture plane is horizontally cut off or covered in black at the top and bottom edges. The stripes thus appear like an arbitrary section of a continuum that might extend indefinitely beyond the frame – something that is prefigured as a compositional scheme by C. D. Friedrich.

The "Candies" series also presents vertical stripes that have been obtained by running paint, usually on a square support. This time, however, they have been applied in a more controlled way and are not sanded down. As the title of the group of works suggests, they remind one of canes in the colours of a confectioner's candy. But by now we have learned that the biological programming which lets us enjoy candy's sweetness does more damage than good, and that we have to fear getting diabetes or becoming overweight. In "Candy [rose]" (2009), indeed, a sense of cloying satiation sets in. "All You Can Eat", a work in four parts (2012), also plays with feelings of satiety and even aversion. At the same time we find allusions to the barcode, all-familiar today, or the oscillating representation of signals as vertical bars, for example in medical apparatuses or music players. By contrast, in "The Basics" (2012), the palette is limited to black/white and the primary colours red, blue and yellow – promoted by Mondrian or Bauhaus as supposed primary elements. So conflict and ambivalence, clashing emotions are present here, too, when one might most likely expect a purely formal approach.

Schiek has a very singular formal style: an unexpected fusion of contemporary art, classic modernism, pop art, raw art, comic strips, naïve roots and formalist abstraction. No matter how innovative he is in blending and assimilating his numerous influences, no matter how artful and clever in extending the scope of painting and developing a new figuration: his work – deeply serious but playful and accessible, too – also allows us profound insights into the human condition. Without doubt, he feeds on the cultural environment of dissolving certainties and of a growing feeling of no longer managing to cope with the increasing pace of change. He is not just concerned with finding new avenues in contemporary painting, with the brilliance of technology or being close to the audience: he is concerned with humanity.