

PAINTING AS A SEARCH FOR COLOR
Reflections on the new paintings by Sybille Pattscheck

One especially noteworthy aspect of concrete art is the fact that its creators voluntarily operate within a relatively narrow working area, thus subjecting themselves to constraints and restrictions that seem to contradict the free choice of means, methods and approaches that painting in particular would seem to embody. This fact applies in particular to monochromatic painting, which dispenses not only with any reference to anything outside the painting but also with any treatment of forms or color contrasts. Instead, it concerns itself exclusively with the presentation of color as the actual object of the painting and concentrates on the effect of color as a material with certain characteristics.

One consequence of this conceptually radical approach is that concrete painting, especially monochromatic painting, cannot legitimate itself through anything other than itself. The painting does not present itself as a picture of anything, nor does it represent in an abstract or symbolic sense anything other than what it concretely is. That is why only its being-just-so and its effect as this being-just-so are the only criteria by which its significance can be judged.

Accordingly, an analysis of concrete art often amounts to a mere description of the structure of the objects in question. However, this frequently brings with it the risk of perceiving only the specific way in which such paintings were produced (including the technical requirements and conditions of this production) rather than the substantive dimension that the (conventional) viewer overlooks. In other words, the method of production is treated as the painting's "iconography": especially in the area of non-objective art, artistic creation can be viewed as an outstanding example of the more or less free creation of an identity. This, as a rule, is already perceived as successful when the works involved can be easily recognized -- that is, when they have a similar structure and style, so that they appear related to one another and can be clearly distinguished from other works. For this reason, the development of such an individual structure is often the first goal of an individual artist's efforts: the picture should be immediately and directly identifiable as the work of a certain individual, so that it becomes identical with its signature, or rather a signature of itself. However, if an individual's artistic talent has already exhausted itself in the development of this kind of artistic "brand," which its inventor then re-creates for a lifetime in different variations -- as a sign of consistency and substance -- then its development corresponds to the iconographically oriented form of observation. In many cases, this development runs counter to the original intention that was the occasion for the development of non-objective art. After all, art that is not geared toward a "recognizing" type of vision but rather toward a "seeing" type of vision - - that is, a type of seeing that becomes aware of the conditions of its own being -- unfortunately all too often reestablishes, through the act of identification, the traditional type of observation that consists exclusively of recognition ("Oh, that's a..."). And this type of observation frequently prevents the pictures from being perceived as specific offers of a certain way of seeing. This mechanism operates even more powerfully when the pictures are presented as, so to speak, objectivized "facts of the case," or pictures without traces of individual work, because that is exactly when this type of observation requires a reflexive reference to the picture's creator, whose personality not only represents the identity of the pictures but is their very foundation.

In her pictures, Sybille Pattscheck has overcome this dilemma of non-objective painting by developing a form of work that could be compared to research. Ever since the artist decided to work with bleached beeswax as a solvent and binder, she has been able to open up for herself as a painter a field of work and action within which she can continue to make new discoveries in the realm of color -- and we, the viewers, can make these discoveries with her.

In contrast to oil-based or water-soluble pigments, painting with wax is subject to a very special set of technical conditions. Wax can be applied only when it is very hot, but it cools off and hardens relatively quickly while it is being applied to a surface. After it has hardened, it can no longer be worked (with the brush). On the other hand, wax remains a malleable mass even when it is in a cool state, while remaining extremely sensitive to both mechanical and thermic influences. In addition to these technical characteristics, wax has yet another feature as a binder: even colored wax remains a transparent mass. This is shown especially clearly in Pattscheck's works on paper and her works on acrylic or glass: even when it is applied to dark backgrounds, the transparent color body of the wax virtually captures the light and seems to store it inside itself. These characteristics of wax dictate two specific requirements for painting with his material. Firstly, the wax must be worked very quickly, because the color rapidly changes its consistency during the painting process, from very fluid to crumbly. And secondly, it is not possible to mix different colors with one another on the surface of the painting, nor to make corrections after the painting is done. If a layer of color does not fulfill the painter's intentions, the entire painting must be done all over again from scratch.

Sybille Pattscheck applies the hot wax with wide brushes onto the surface of a canvas that is lying on the floor. In the process, she often emphasizes the starting point of the application stroke by letting the material remain relatively thick at this point. In the course of the brushstroke, the color of the wax increasingly thins out, and in the process the increasingly thin wax reveals the structure of the brush, down to the individual hairs. Sybille Pattscheck has mastered this transformation of the brushstroke from an unstructured, all-covering beginning all the way to its resolution into a fine, seemingly varnished structure that nearly disappears into the background material. She has not only perfectly mastered this process in terms of craftsmanship, she has also made it her possibly most important painter's tool in her search for color.

A further important artistic means used by the painter is the conscious way she deals with the fact that wax colors cannot be re-painted but instead must be applied in layers superimposed on one another. The painter emphasizes this characteristic of her medium by nearly always placing sets of parallel brushstrokes in layers that go in opposite directions or lie staggered on top of one another on the painting's surface. This creates a variety of interfaces and overlaps, but the translucent nature of the material makes nearly every individual action of the painter visible and recognizable. In conjunction with the aforementioned continuous transformation of the brushstrokes from a viscous, all-covering mass to a finely structured, varnished layer, this operation not only enables the artist to create an extremely differentiated painting surface, but also makes it possible for the viewer to experience the painting literally as a story that takes place within a range of color. The viewer is able to look into this story more directly at certain points and less directly at others.

The third characteristic element of Sybille Pattscheck's strategy as a painter is that she does not present her paintings in the position in which they are produced (they lie on the floor when they are being painted). Instead, they are hung on the wall in conventional fashion, often in such a way that the thicker ends of the brushstrokes are in the lower portion of the painting. That creates the impression, at least from afar, that the colors have flowed downwards and thickened into blobs. These "presentations against the grain" create a fundamental sense of confusion in the observer, because they call into question the chronological structure that is manifest in the overlaps and transformations of the brushstrokes, and instead create the impression that all of these visual effects came into being simultaneously. However, this strategy invites the viewer to come closer to the paintings and look at them more carefully -- and the same effect is achieved by the painter's differentiation of the brushstrokes and the layering or staggering of parallel sets of brushstrokes.

In the most recent paintings, which were not only lying on the floor on the floor but also hanging in an upright position while they were produced, these tools of the painter

interact in a particularly complex way. Here, the skilled brushing of the material into a fine structure in a single direction stands in contrast to the material's amorphous nature at the beginning of the brushstroke as well as its natural tendency to drip, ooze and flow in the opposite direction. This results in an effective confrontation between a controlled action carried out on the material with a tool and the gesture made by the material's natural behavior. Thus this painterly operation, which is repeated many times in parallel strokes as well as layered and staggered strokes of the surface of the picture, creates a highly differentiated physical image. But this physical image is also determined in another way by the open interactions between the painter's intentional acts and the behavior of the material itself. The physical image can have a surface that is shiny and cold, one that is dull and seems to swallow up the light, or a nearly glowing one; it can give the impression of being simultaneously opaque/closed and transparent; it can diffract light, reflect it or enclose it; and it can appear as a colored surface that is applied to the canvas or as a translucent space containing the image. Whatever the appearance of this physical image may be, Sybille Pattscheck always succeeds as a painter in creating visual environments within which several things happen: not only does a more or less calculated play of colors take place, but also color tones and color effects are presented to view that come into being in the first place through the painting itself.

The declared goal of this artist is to present to view this "discovered color." However, finding a color -- as the works before us should clearly show -- is not a task that is could be accomplished by means of intellectual discourse. In order to reach this goal, what is needed instead is craftsmanlike skill in its comprehensive sense, artistic skill that knows how to make visible the material's inherent properties and present them to the viewer as a substance. It is obvious that Sybille Pattscheck's paintings are substantial paintings in this sense of the word -- paintings which resemble living organisms because within them form and material are not merely combined but rather become a new unity in a concrete synthesis of the organizing process and that which is organized -- a unity out of which something independent emerges: "found color."

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