

The History and Dynamic of Painting

The mistrust with regard to the medium of painting is particularly justified when it is understood implicitly or explicitly as a reaction to other artistic practices and programmes. This is mostly the case in periods such as the present, when the medium is particularly successful in exhibitions and on the market. Then a gloomy reaction rapidly makes itself felt and in the analysis the people who do the talking are those who would prefer that the late modern and subsequent artistic positions were forgotten. The feelings of happiness that then arise see the happily admired contemporary production ultimately only as a symptom of a bygone art, and such a selective historical awareness ultimately leads to a strange kind of ahistoricism. In art, too, the sequences are continual, and to relate varied distant elements to each other does not yet create a story. This can be just as true both of figurative as well as non-figurative painting. In the latter case, ignoring the existence of abstraction that makes the repetition of a process impossible because of the changed context also means a loss of history. Painting has thus become a stage on which there is not very much space and on which one can only move by incorporating the analytical processes that reflect its history.

Joseph Marsteurer is certainly aware of this problem of contemporary painting. Often bordering on a scientific experimental arrangement he reflects on the medium of painting in a way that is not marked by superficial affirmation and also not by casual distance but springs from a genuine interest in understanding the medium and pushing it forward through this understanding. In contrast to other artists, his starting point here is not primarily historical but concentrates initially on the basic characteristics of the medium and on its components, such as canvas, paint, brush, spatial context and image idea. This weighting, however, does not mean that the historical dimension does not come into the picture, as the exploration of the characteristics of the medium also always displays a chronological dimension. The main object of investigation, for example, is the question of the materiality of the image. This question is naturally historically very strained, as in the history of modern painting a connection was drawn between abstraction that is lack of object and the pure image that is absence of material. Since minimalist painting, this ideology of the pure image, which also seeks to draw a fundamental boundary between image and sculpture, has repeatedly been contradicted inasmuch as the materiality of the paint has been forced into the centre or the image itself became the sculpture or part of it.

Marsteurer here does not adopt one position or the other; he as it were picks the question out of the image. The paint appears in the form of brushstrokes on transparent material, dated, labelled with an exact description and above all with precise details of size and weight. An interesting contradiction arises here: on the one hand the material is certainly removed from the image and we can to a certain extent conceive of the image without material, on the other hand however the reference to the materiality is unmistakable, the physical characteristics of the image are documented again at another level. In the objects, the transparency of the foil that holds the brushstrokes refers to the immateriality; the paint itself again in the other direction. Marsteurer thus places image as idea and image as object in an essentially indissoluble relationship; no side can be reduced to the other, it is the dynamic relation that determines the character of the images. This indissolubility goes beyond the question of the image as object and can also be extended to the relationship of (conceptual) content and form of the work of art. In this way, painting is also analysed beyond its boundaries and thus a discourse develops that clearly contradicts the above-mentioned ideology of painting as an alternative to other artistic practices.

Another dimension of these works concerns the memory of painting: on the surface the works do not archive images but fragments that are apparently out of context. The brushstrokes are fragments, however that always refer to their surroundings, as the transparent foils and the form of presentation does not provide them with sufficient support or framework. Thus the artist does not capture any specific images, but in these works triggers a mass of possible images that move in a river of bygone impressions. The arrangement that is normally associated with the image mode is abandoned. Ultimately this is a process that shows a close relationship to minimalist painting and the problem related to it. If there the autonomy of the image is scrutinised with the (possible) reference to the staging – the performative character that is meant by Fried's term theatricality – Marsteurer dissolves the ever present stage of the image (a piece of canvas in a two-dimensional form on which there is or is not paint). Instead of building a stage around the image, not only are the boards dismantled, but so are the frames, the canvas and the paint. The archive is thus more than just an aid to memory; through its loose, relaxed manner it opens up rigid contexts and thus again points to one of the artist's basic motifs, the approach to a concept of image that is constituted out of a flowing dynamic.

The large image installations also follow this logic. Here it is a question of drawing boundaries: at what point does the image emerge and at what point does the image stop? We know works that concern the

area between image and installation, in which the image is addressed in its spatial anchoring. The usual strategy there is that the image grows out of itself and thus illustrates this anchoring. With Marsteurer the strategies are somewhat more complex: the route does not just lead out of the image but also into the image. The cubic structure made of wooden slats not only extends the frame, it encloses the image. The fragments on the canvas drive the play of extension and restriction on the canvas forward again. The artist does not take the image in the centre as the starting point of his considerations; from all sides and in all dimensions, cross-references are created that produce an open situation in which nothing is hanging on the wall or standing in the room. What is visible on the other hand is a process in which painting practice and concept of image resulting from it are scrutinised. Image and plan of the image become indistinguishable.

In his Graz installation the artist has taken this indistinguishability a stage further, as there the image is only present in the room as an illusion, thus the medium is left in a functional way as the installation is rather reminiscent of an optical process and its effects. Formally, however, Marsteurer never deserts painting; this is above all evident in the field of tension between geometrical line, gestural brush stroke and paint mark. No assertions are made here, but ever new possibilities of seeing are suggested and thus a nevertheless very open artistic practice is demonstrated. Where other artists work by means of concentration and condensation, with Marsteurer one can rather speak of removal, with it being the resulting empty spaces that lead to a concentration in the mental sense.

This artistic strategy is illustrated in a very direct way in his series '*Abbildnisse*' [portrayals] where the German prefix "ab-" [from] is understood in its negative reading and the artist develops a language of form through which a person portrayed is as it were calculated out of the picture. A profile portrait, that indeed in contrast to the quarter profile or the frontal portrait primarily conveys "objective" identification features, serves as a photographic model. Circle segments are situated at defined points within it, and in this way abstract-like drawings develop from which the person being portrayed ultimately has to select one. It is thus not the subjective view of the artist, but the subjective view of the person portrayed that completes the picture. Between content and the eye of the observer there is a conceptual process that suggests a machine-like objectivity, but which like every technical medium ultimately proves to be a myth. The abstract form on the other hand is personified, what was worked out like a code from recognition features, is brought back into the picture again not by a machine but by the

person who was the starting point for the code, on the basis of their aesthetic preferences, that is, at a completely different level of identification.

In these works, too, it becomes clear how consciously Marsteurer approaches the development and the history of painting. The portrait in the late Middle Ages could not be drawn on for the identification of the person at all; only the profile portrayal changed this, and the abstraction of the modern age once again pushed identification into the background. Technological media have ultimately made the image totally superfluous for identification. It is actually only a question of points; the whole remains in virtual space. Artists introduce these perceptions into a development dynamic in which, however, it is always a question of the image and its history. The artist's method here is always a very cautious one: the things are constantly related and weighed in new arrangements with one another, and the images do not become visible at all without an analysis on the part of the observer. Once the work is done, however, one knows that painting is a very living medium.

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