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Veronika Hilger: *Strange Weather*

As you look around, nature is undeniably present in Veronika Hilger's paintings.¹ We can soon spot the curve of a hill or a plant, the sky in that peculiar shade of violet-grey, the setting sun or the rising moon. There are also some buildings and figures, in various constellations, and those sounds of someone working alone in an upper room. But the weather, the weather is never quiet. Her paintings have all the strangeness of shuttered heat. As the temperatures rise in our darkened flats, catastrophe looms above us like a mudslide.

Her paintings have been described as ambiguous, and there are still many ambiguities to be found here, in this latest series of work. In one, moonlight seems to glisten on a drooping form, casting a shadow to the right. But this form is rooted in a flat space that both withdraws and reasserts its presence. A third form impossibly overlaps the second, a weightless mass of scraped-away paint. These ambiguities are not found but developed over long periods of time. Veronika Hilger begins her paintings with a loose set of gestures, by blocking out the major colour areas. She then examines each canvas closely for these strange moments when painting can be one thing or another and slowly tightens them until they are contained within the strict parameters of her frame.

The ambiguity of her paintings has to do with the nature in them, participating in the deception Adorno ascribed to natural beauty.² Fifty years ago, Adorno could still claim that our relationship to nature is primarily one of domination and that only culture's indirect acknowledgment of this unequal power dynamic can bring about future reconciliation. For while the experience of natural beauty recalls a world without domination, there is no real freedom to be found here, as his example of the blackbird so memorably shows. He writes, very few are not moved by a blackbird's song after the rain. Yet its song is unsettling precisely because it is not a song - the bird acts under the spell of its instincts. No wonder we find the sight of migratory flocks vaguely threatening. For Adorno, art as a cultural entity extricates itself from instinctive behaviour and breaks away from nature's spell, creating a space in which nature can be experienced more freely.

And now we know it is not enough. While we continue to deceive ourselves by taking pleasure in the trim hills of the Bavarian landscape, very few of us would consider this environment natural. This is the world of Veronika Hilger's paintings: landscapes steeped in human activity. But she never imposes order on nature's chaotic multiplicity. Rather, in a gesture borrowed from surrealism, she introduces an element of chaos into our overly smooth world, like those petri dishes in which new bulbous life-forms replicate and grow. If a sense of unmastered nature erupts unexpectedly from her landscapes, it is because Veronika Hilger pursues this quality ruthlessly and relentlessly, in each painting anew, with a different set of variables. Here it might take the form of an eerie green light, wispy clouds, or a skeletal draped figure seemingly borrowed from 1930s Dali; there, scraped-away surfaces recall Max Ernst rock formations. A Magritte-like play with signs features strongly in another. The flying ghosts of surrealism, long stripped of their power to shock, regain disruptive potential, to break apart what we consider natural. The surreal here is the untethered "Where have I seen this before?" that stops me in my tracks. And when I stop so abruptly, and in the wonder of my own uncertainty, I do feel that sense of loss - and with it also a sense of foreboding. The atmosphere is stifling as I look for the remnants of longing among the scattered shells of modernism.

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¹ The opening paragraph is a response to Adrian Searle's description of Raoul de Keyser's paintings, written for the 1994 Hayward Gallery exhibition "Unbound: The Possibilities of Painting." He writes, "Raoul De Keyser's paintings have the concentration of a stare.... There's nature in them, and buildings, and quiet weather, and the sounds of a man working alone in an upper room."

² Adorno, Theodor, *Aesthetic Theory*, ed. Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Continuum: London, New York, 2004), 87.