

GALERIE CHRISTINE MAYER

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Spider-Man says: fight or flee

A conversation between Thomas von Poschinger and Professor Bettina Blumenberg

BB. You live in London, have just spent several months in Paris, but you're often back in Germany. How do you see your country of origin today, and how does it influence your work?

TvP. I didn't go abroad because I hoped it would make me a different artist but because I wanted a change and because I think that being open to new things often helps one develop; it breaks patterns that may have become too familiar in an environment one has always known. There are artists, especially painters, who mainly stay in one place, and of course that makes sense in painting. But for my own personal development, I've found it important to be somewhere else. How much my country of origin or being abroad influences my work, I can't say. I only know that my work is about Sehnsucht, longing. To be somewhere else, to be in the place one feels attracted to, at least partly fulfils this longing, or casts it in a different light, and that definitely has an impact on one's own work.

BB. In the word Sehnsucht is also the notion of searching, suchen, and that's particularly evident in the works exhibited here: how you advance in the paintings and from painting to painting in a searching way. Did you make a plan as to how, with this pictorial programme, you could curb your Sehnsucht – for instance, through the choice of colours, or the decision to work exclusively with individual brushstrokes?

TvP. I find your idea of advancing through the painting in a searching way a very beautiful thought. This feeling of longing, of Sehnsucht, is very enigmatic and can quickly become sentimental. When I begin my paintings, I don't approach this by saying to myself that I have to curb this sentimentality. The paintings follow the concept that they are made of horizontal and vertical brushstrokes and that, in each case, these are single brushstrokes. But I make this decision mainly to reduce my options a little, to simplify the process of painting. Since painting itself already involves so many strange exigencies and uncertainties. The colours are chosen intuitively: for example, five lines in blue, and then colours that might go well next to blue.

Recently, I went with my nephew to see Spider-Man. The lead actor, Tom Holland, crawls over skyscrapers – like a spider – and is seen as a body against the vast surface of the building. For some reason, this image keeps coming back to me, also in relation to my paintings: the idea that you have a white surface in front of you – which in my case lies on the floor – and I as a body respond to this surface, explore this surface.

BB. These brushstrokes and the glowing colours, which are combined in different ways on the canvas but are always very radiant, invoking a positive response in the viewer, at the same time suggest a search for order. In my perception, I notice that the apparent order keeps leading me astray. You call your exhibition *Irrgarten*¹ – a wonderful translation of ‘labyrinth’ – and with this word, a vivid image immediately comes to mind, and I also think of the danger lurking inside: the hellhound Cerberus. At every turn, one has to make a decision about which direction to take next to get to one’s goal. But as an artist, you never get to your goal; that’s the constant challenge. Ferdinand von Schirach says: ‘All art comes from the artist’s uncertainty about the world.’

TvP. If you look down on an *Irrgarten* from above, it looks extremely orderly, like a pattern. The way it’s conceived means that, as a visitor, I can get lost there, but in the end, I’m still able to find my way out again – so it’s a game. The *Irrgarten* plays with the expectations of outside and inside. In painting, there’s also this passionate game: the desire for harmony, while at the same time – to stay with Schirach – losing yourself in the image or even in the world.

BB. I’d like to follow that up with another statement: the composer Wolfgang Rihm says: ‘To make art always means to make yourself vulnerable. That’s something you have to endure.’ And yet he himself always goes on the counteroffensive: he creates an art that overwhelms us. But that’s something you don’t do, Tommy; you offer the eye a connection to the senses, to the emotions, to uncover the entrance to the *Irrgarten*. This has something conciliatory about it, something that creates an opening, right? I have a lot of sympathy for the idea of rescue in art, through art – is that something you can identify with?

TvP. Absolutely. Painting certainly helps to overcome speechlessness, to solve things. A painting doesn’t have to spell everything out; it can simply be what it is. When I speak with someone, I prefer it when this person can be him- or herself, when he or she isn’t wearing countless masks. That can be fascinating, too, but I think that, for a lasting connection, self-awareness on both sides is preferable. Only then can two people actually listen to each other, have a proper conversation.

I like the thought that the same kind of conversation can also take place between a viewer and my painting – the painting as a body. When I told you about my Spider-Man experience, it was already also about the body and its relation to painting. Our interview made me aware again that the human body, or the body of the painting, is a crucial instrument for me. So it makes me particularly happy when you say you can enter into a relation with my

¹ The German *Irrgarten* (literally a garden in which one wanders, goes astray – *irren*), commonly refers to a hedge maze.

paintings. It's good when paintings can do that. And so Rihm is right when he says that to make art always also means to make yourself vulnerable, to be open. The same is true of friendship. Otherwise, it quickly gets boring.

BB. That you don't have to spell everything out is such an important observation. That's true in so many situations: to have the courage to let things retain their mystery. That seems to me to be particularly important in art, even essential: not to encroach on the mystery through explanations. The viewer's conversation with the artwork is an inner dialogue; it doesn't have to seek agreement with the artist, nor will it find it. And your work, it seems to me, relies very strongly on suggestions. The brushstrokes and the spaces between the brushstrokes, as well as the sometimes arbitrary-seeming length or shortness of these brushstrokes, which of course is never arbitrary – they clearly show the tension between the decisiveness of your mark-making and the playful freedom of leaving things open. And this naturally includes the playful element of the colours, which are never arbitrary, but in the way they're set down, they formulate a sense of urgency: this is how they must be, this is the only way they can be, here, in this place – that's how I understand it.

TvP. For me, it's not a question of mystery. I don't want to hide anything. What you see on my painting is all there is. And yet, of course, you're right. The conversation the viewer has with my painting remains private. The brushstrokes feel very physical. They're applied once and there are no corrections. The variations, the distances between them, and the sequence all take place on the painting, and I accept them. If I approach the painting with a preconceived idea, it always goes wrong. If I tell myself, for example, in the next painting, I'll start with a rectangle of grey brushstrokes, it won't work. Still, there is a concept: paint, have another look at the painting, accept.

BB. The principle of chance and necessity that you just implicitly referred to and that's so essential in art, as also in our lives, is reformulated by you in your works and taken to an astonishing extreme that says: here, there's neither. The principle can only be seen from a bird's-eye perspective, when you look down on the Irrgarten from above. Back on earth, however, the principle acquires a different intensity. And it's here that I see the existential urgency that has to do with the state of our life-world. We live in so many realities, many of which are threatening and plunge us into uncertainty. Isn't it this feeling that is firmly and resolutely countered by your works?

TvP. Oh, here I have to think of Francis Bacon! That was such an important part of his paintings, this simultaneity of chance and necessity. As a human, it's impossible to avoid living simultaneously both in myself and in the world. Again, you're leading me to this idea of inside and outside. For me, it was important that my paintings are clear, concentrated, and direct. But as I said, it doesn't make a difference what I personally want, there is always the challenge of living simultaneously in at least two life-worlds; otherwise, we would disappear into our own bodies like in the legendary paintings of Francis Bacon.

BB. But isn't that what's exciting about art: that it provokes something in viewers that needn't be identical with the artist's intentions? That's why I want to come back to the idea of being overwhelmed that I had previously ruled out

for your artistic intentions. Now I see the many canvases with the many brushstrokes and the many colours on so many walls, and I want to bring this beautiful word 'overwhelming' into play again: isn't this overwhelming quality something you intended after all, or is it only me who sees, feels, understands this installation this way and only me who senses this effect so strongly? For me, that's the essence.

TvP. Love is the essence. In art, I always and at all times have theoretically endless possibilities. So I have to make decisions. The most important thing is, despite this, to remain vulnerable.

I want that conscious connection, and for this I have to be accessible. When things are overwhelming, that doesn't work. But the impression you have of my art strikes a chord, and I can't help asking myself whether I'm back at the beginning of our conversation, namely with Sehnsucht. There's an attraction there, but I don't give into it. Good art is progress.