

SVENJA DEININGER QUOTES

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I first met Svenja Deininger in person a few days ago. As we were having coffee in the courtyard of her studio, the chatter of a couple of neighbors provided a background to ours. Although I can't really explain why, this interference of the day-to-day that inevitably creeps into conversations about painting—which always try to develop neatly along the lines of geometric pattern—seemed auspicious to my viewing of her work that day, strangely enough.

During our conversation, I recapped the highlights of my encounter with her work. Paintings in frames with irregular perimeters was the image I took home from the first show of hers I saw at Federica Schiavo (2015). There, the frame was both a sort of ribbing emanating outward from the painting's form and the element that envelops, defines, and freezes it as the work's final act: in a word, a frame. Then there was the exhibition at Collezione Maramotti, where selected works by Polish artist Władysław Strzemiński, an exponent of modernism in search of new possibilities in the relationships between abstraction and reality, irradiation and propagation, provided counterpoint to Deininger's new works. One of her works is displayed here at Schiavo Zoppelli in *Quotes*, the solo show I've been asked to write about, and like some sort of power hub connects the two shows together.

I tried to avoid using the words abstraction and figuration while chatting with Svenja. The terrain bounded by these two obsolete-sounding twentieth-century categories is slippery ground indeed, and even greater care is required when considering Deininger's work. Now: is her work wholly abstract? (I wouldn't say so). And just where does that gust of reality (that makes things traceable to the real) blowing through so many of her paintings come from?

Some of her previous works seem headed towards portraits and figures. *Quotes* features one with a black semicircular note (*Untitled*, 2022) at the top and shapes suggesting the profiles of buildings apparently intent on landscape in many places but only in labile and intermittent form. Are these really profiles of *things*? Details of architecture? Don't all those lines and profiles really indicate pillars, cornices or handrails? Are these the vague illusions to reality the "quotes" that the show's title refers to?

Deininger's works could be seen as being traversed by two opposing forces: a drive towards composition developed to the logic of abstract syntax, combinatorial grammar or collage, on one hand; a force that acts on the viewer to invite him or her, albeit temporarily, to make each image coincide with different images of landscapes, things or figures, on the other.

Another aspect that connotes Deininger's work is the objectual nature every painting of hers has, the idea that each one is a device that gets its composite material articulation involved: the surface and the back side of the canvas, a thick support, sometimes the result of an overlapping of different canvases (so that the tones of those underneath blend with those on the surface), the edge (which is sometimes also painted), and the stretcher (shaped in a series of works she's been developing for years). The different shades of pink recurring in many of her color fields that bring human flesh to mind (I know Svenja would only partially agree) amplify the impression of "sensitive surface" that numerous paintings of hers give.

I gazed long in her studio at these paintings with shaped frames trying to establish different trajectories of vision around the two walls on which they lean. At *Quotes*, these six works occupy adjacent walls, but rather than granting configuration as a compact series, the proximities provide a score along which apparent similarities and recurrences, inversions and contrasts resonate.

These works thus have articulated surfaces that emerge from the combination of shapes produced by the curves and shaping of the stretcher and color fields that may either repeat or disarticulate the shapes, varying them. They are divided into areas with perimeters marked by a line that may thicken, narrow, or sink into the support as if cleaving or cutting it (the contours of these areas may recall details of reality and its particulars, if but vaguely); they involve a close range of tones capable of reciprocal relay within individual paintings and between different paintings in the sequence.

Moreover, color has the same constructive capacity as the stretcher in each; a color can also be spread on the reverse side of the canvas (determining the quality of surface tones) and along the edges, inviting the viewer to move to the sides. Finally, precisely because of this referencing and relaunching of energy and due to the sense of unresolvedness and suspension inherent in each of her works, the paintings with shaped stretchers “activate the wall”, and the white spaces between the works is the negative of the score that plays an active role in the web of relationships established within the sequence.

Just as the walls, also the entire gallery space is activated and reconfigured at *Quotes* around what seems to be its real center of gravity, a work *Untitled* (2022) in which three canvases with decidedly vertical format without stretchers hang from the ceiling to where they graze the floor. The three canvases one next to the other in staggered rhythm are painted on both sides with vertical banding patterns and a kind of triptych set back from the wall just enough to allow the viewer to make a 360° turn around the paintings and see both sides.

Looking at this work incidentally, I distinctly thought of the two-faced vitality of certain Renaissance polyptychs or altarpieces (works placed away from the wall and within the space) in which the painted or decorated back side prepares for the vision of the front; except that here, there's no front side, no back side, just two sides with the same degree of incision.

I also thought of Rothko (and his triptychs) more than Buren (at the '71 Guggenheim exhibition) and a particular vitality inside the works that has something to do with breathing: Deininger's three canvases certainly embrace the possibility of a slight physical shifting caused by the forces of air and the movements of human bodies around them, but also a continuous forward and backward movement in space that results from the combinations of tones and shades of colors on their surfaces.

Rothko came to mind again when considering how the three canvases weld together to let the viewer delimit the field of vision by temporarily excluding the wall and surrounding space with the proximity of her or his body.

The three vertical canvases also appear to me as "palette paintings" (i.e., every shade of the works chosen for *Quotes* seems to converge in them) and also for this reason seem to function as a connection and activate the rhythm of the vision of the entire exhibition through the countless viewpoints created around them corresponding to a mobile and vibratory temporality of vision.

Getting back to breathing: in Deininger's work I associate it with a particular form of movement that is discreet, barely perceptible perpetually flowing in and out of each of her works, as in the “quasi-monochrome” (yellow on yellow) painting that vibrates by an unresolvedness of forms that do not end and interpenetrate into the different yellows of the surface (a yellow that becomes duller, almost dirty here, but brighter there).

Further to the point, in many of the show's works, proximities between thicker, more assertive color fields derived from more decisive layering and areas having an “unfinished” air (in which the color is only a thin layer that highlights the texture of the canvas underneath) generate a movement that has the pace of a breath, delicate advance and retreat, inflow/outflow, alternately opening the paintings out to space and reclosing them in their own materiality.

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