

In the Space between Pictures - Painting by Michael van Ofen

Here, a cool blue colour gradient that brings to mind a horizontal line as a minimum of landscape. There, no more than three spotty blobs on a black background that, readable as a head and hands, let the viewer see a standing figure. Michael van Ofen's new pictures are even more reduced than what we have come to expect from his former works. They are further tapered to that turning point at which a picture becomes visible and achieves a specific presence between pure painting and imaginative space. Van Ofen has always worked on this fine line between artistic abstraction, collected objectivity and perceptive image. He exploits the area as a region of tension. In this region, it is about convincingly and clearly hitting the artistically important point where these aspects intertwine, almost become crystallised, and where a picture may even open up further into quiet irony and something silently cryptic. Van Ofen unfolds the simple into the complex, and the work is really about reinventing this again and again, staging it as if undecided between the art of painting's objective reference and self-reference. By now, van Ofen manages to get to this point using the bare minimum.

To achieve this, he has developed characteristic subjects and a typical form language in ca. 25 years. He has managed something rare, i.e. conducting painting convincingly and simultaneously reflecting its means without didactically playing one off against the other. He conceptualised the artistic gesture while giving it back to the art of painting in equal measures. He says it is his "consistent topic to connect the creation of an illusional space behind the canvas (i.e. an imaginary space as only the art of figure painting possesses it) with the presentation of the method used to evoke this picture space." (1) Presenting the means and using their full potential is a continuing fascination for Michael van Ofen. However, honouring this concept has to be done anew with every picture. On the one hand, van Ofen clearly practises painting as a reflective medium. On the other hand, honouring the concept defies prediction, and it is unavoidable that it can only be realised in the process of painting.

Thus, there are not only pure conceptual manoeuvres taking place here: a picture can also fail. The attempt to make something appear can be unsuccessful. One can get off course. This is important if you want to understand what "succeeding" is about. Van Ofen's art of medial reflection deals with something genuinely artistic. It is about appearance, and also seriously considers the picture as an appearance. In his latest works, the reduction of the subject to its essence shows how strongly van Ofen focuses and concentrates on this feature in the individual picture at this time. But this comment is valid for his artistic approach in general. Often these works seem as if the picture in it shimmers through the painting diffusely or distantly. As if it only shows itself by drawing the

viewer's attention away from itself and onto the art of painting itself. Objectivity is present, but it is disguised by painting, withdrawn from view and compelled to the edge of dissolution. Through the mimetic minimum, van Ofen also formulates what painting by itself inserts into the visual concept of objectivity.

As a matter of fact, his mimesis hardly ever refers directly to the objective world, but instead again to painting. Van Ofen sometimes modestly talks of "copying" - "for a traditional painter, that is something quite normal, as with the Flemish artists, for example, who made pilgrimages to Italy and copied. I don't see anything different in my works." But his work is about more than that, as his paintings make references to picture clichés and a visual grammar embedded in them. Characteristically, he locates his "source material" mainly in the 19th century's picture production, and often it is the rather dubious works that he is attracted to: "Images I like to use best", van Ofen says, "are often far back on the historical shelf." In these paintings, van Ofen unveils condensed visual experiences, rules of perception, that reach far into today's everyday experiences. "In it, you find the last 35,000 years of painting history", thinks van Ofen, "a visual education from the phylogenetic development to the 19th century. This outlook has evoked genres that are still applicable to our perception today. The 19th century is the threshold in this respect. Its end coincides with the beginning of the Modern era, and does not outlive the Pop era and its instruments conveying pictures. But everything is contained in the classic genres like landscape, portrait, full and half figure portrait, bust, still life, interior etc. I move in this field."

By abstractly referring to already shaped models, van Ofen reveals picture paradigms. He draws the view to perceptive constitutive patterns acting within them. He deconstructs picture compositions and colour grammars while transforming and outrunning them in his own art. He provides their appearances with new qualities by alienating them almost beyond recognition. Many of his earlier works in particular closely refer to models: *Rue Neuve Notre Dame* (1995), for example is based on Eduard Gaertner's *Rue Neuve Notre Dame in Paris* (1826), and in *Die drei Jäger* (1993), Wilhelm von Kobell's *Drei Jäger zu Pferde, die Strecke besichtigend* (1822) can be deciphered. This is also true for his more recent paintings, e.g. *Junge Stuttgarterin* (2004) paraphrases Franz Seraph Stirnbrand's *Junge Stuttgarterin im blauem Kleid* (1838). But van Ofen more and more reaches visually coded archetypes with his paintings, and often, one picture of a genre is enough for this: Over the years, he has painted abstract still lifes like *Blumen* (1999) in remarkable variations and approaches. All of these go back to one template, which is Josef Lauer's *Blumen in einem blauen Überfangglas* (1850). Van Ofen also looks at the portrait in this way: in *untitled/Offizierstudie* (2008), inspired by Anton von Werner's historic sketches, he presents the individual as pragmatically constructed. Especially such reduced pictures as *untitled/Stresemann* (2008) prove

how directly these dealings with traditional picture awareness actually work and how subtly van Ofen formulates the boundaries of abstraction. “There is really not much on it”, he says, “but nevertheless, you associate with it: head, two hands, person, a certain dignified demeanour – and probably also the genre of the representative politician’s portrait from around the turn of the century. This only works if it is artistically precise and the picture genre’s conditions are fulfilled efficiently. If I turn this around,” continues van Ofen, “then it is not an upside down picture, it is no longer anything.”

- Jens Asthoff

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