

ALEXANDER WOLFF

NEW WORK

1. April — 27. Mai 2023

Philipp Pflug Contemporary

The Long Way to the Studio

Alexander Wolff's work primarily addresses painting itself, and with it the complex relationship between color and shape, between the image ground and the application of paint, as well as the possible forms of and possibilities inherent in painting. He usually experiments with different techniques and approaches within set parameters, searching for shapes and constructions of meaning he is unfamiliar with in order to give rise to new images that are simultaneously connected to the outside world. He works on several approaches at once, tackling each with a playful and unceremonious attitude that is nevertheless shaped by his great theoretical knowledge and familiarity with various traditions. The present exhibition thus also shows analogies in approach and thinking to Jasper Johns, Christopher Wool and Heimo Zobernig, in its use of writing as an ideational theme, the grid as an organizing principle of the picture surface, and abstraction in the context of concrete questions. Further, with his works Alexander Wolff prompts his audiences to reflect on the physical properties of paint and color, to consider the painting process and the essential elements of the medium.

The majority of Alexander Wolff's current paintings are based on Chinese characters in a range of digital typographies. These provide graphic material and possibilities for a formal vocabulary, which he employs to construct his compositions. In these, the Chinese characters can be made out more or less clearly each time while appearing to dissolve in the colors, shapes, and surfaces of the painting. The painting process itself is neither visible nor can it be precisely traced, yet in some cases we feel as though we are able to follow the loose choreography.

As the co-editor of a fanzine on contemporary art, theory and society Alexander Wolff has been working with font design for a long time. Every edition of his magazine is printed in a different font and also titled after this respective font; he sees writing in its formal execution as a medium of expression. His fascination and interest in the aesthetic and expressive aspects of Chinese characters is based on this understanding. Calligraphy on the other hand is the art of writing beautifully. In this Asian tradition, achieving perfect aesthetic balance and visualizing emotions through precise gestures are more important than legibility. Despite his rather constructive approach, Wolff's engagement with the characters and his work to translate them into a harmonious whole does have things in common with the work of a calligrapher. The characters undergo a shift in function as they become a new image detached from their meaning.

Alexander Wolff frequently cuts old rags he has used to wipe his paint brush into pieces and rearranges them, sews them together and stretches them onto a stretcher frame. In part these works follow a strict geometry achieved through the straight seams and the monochrome and colorful surfaces, which in turn playfully counteract the rigorous formal structure. The technique used in this work group is reminiscent of Ranru, also referred to as Boro. Ranru is an old Japanese tradition and a technique that arose out of the plight of the rural poor and their need to use any available cloth. Expensive cotton fabrics were reserved for the upper class, but as old, worn and threadbare fabrics,

clothes or rags they found their way into the hands of the Japanese rural population at a low price, which layered them to create blankets, jackets and trousers – sometimes to aesthetically impressive results.

“The Long Way to the Studio” describes a temporal process, the development of a matter in the long term, in connection with a desired goal. The studio here appears like a place of longing, where you can leave everyday life behind in order to devote yourself entirely to productive creation.

“People often idolize the studio and what goes on in there. Even in my imagination my own studio sometimes appears like that, because amidst the whole messiness of our existence the work I do there has a sense of clarity. – At the same time it is precisely the life outside that fills this place (or the work I do there) with content and references in the first place. Without life there would be no art to make, and somehow the journey is reflected in the destination, so sometimes the journey has to be long in order for something to emerge in the studio.” (A. W.)

This makes Wolff’s studio a spatially defined place of retreat and creative thought, a place to figure out oneself and the world, and oneself in the world, of understanding and describing and interpreting the world in different ways and in this way also recreating it. “The Long Way to the Studio” also describes how patience and perseverance, i.e. dedicating oneself to one thing for a long time and without slackening interest, are decisive factors. In this sense the present exhibition must be understood as continuing the artist’s inquiry into and questioning of abstraction and the possibilities of painting, an undertaking in which he purposely refrains from clearly defining pre-set goals.

Bernd Reiss