

Erwin Bohatsch: Capricci

Opening: Thursday, 7th March 2024, 7–9 pm

Duration: 8th March until 6th April 2024

Galerie Martin Janda is pleased to present Erwin Bohatsch's first solo exhibition from 8th March until 6th April 2024.

Art historians and theorists tend to draw comparisons and make categorisations. This rounded corner, does it already appear in Oskar Schlemmer's work? That strange arch at the top left? Is that more Dorothea Tanning or Merlin Carpenter or even Amy Sillman?

Comparison, mimesis, as the literary scholar and philosopher of religion René Girard puts it, is the main anthropological tool that allows people to develop and move forward. Without the drive to compare ourselves with other subjects, there would be no progress. This fundamental insight leads us directly to painting and thus to Erwin Bohatsch's new works. An inner affinity with all the painters mentioned above is given from the outset in Bohatsch's new paintings and probably in many others as well: This curly cloud, for example, does it not refer to Philip Guston?

Let's leave it at that, because you can see straight away that such comparisons can be taken ad absurdum and still lead nowhere - with one exception perhaps, but more on that later, because it is actually so astounding that I absolutely have to note it here. Ultimately, it is not the detail of a painted picture that is decisive, but the entire work: the texture, the material, the entire composition and, last but not least, the individual history of an artistic signature.

Erwin Bohatsch's new works are at the same time both self-conscious and wild. A controlled gesture sweeps across the canvas and is slowed down here and there. The flow of the colour line constantly seems to take a step back, only to break out of its orderliness again somewhere, to ebb away or simply percolate into a new world of colour. Small inconsistencies such as an unmotivated piece of green that bashfully brushes along the edge but doesn't go any further. Strangely curved shapes repeat themselves – almost. A roughly geometric surface then covers both, but only partially. In the background we are dealing with a kind of architecture, although it is not spatial at all, but flat. The space in these paintings in general: Where are we standing? Where is the painted object? Is it lying down? Is it floating? Is it falling over? Is it an object at all? But what else could it be?

It is questions like these that painting, when it is good, repeatedly brings to our attention. These are the old problems of abstract painting, they have hardly changed. But it would be absurd to question this fact, because each new generation of artists has to formulate its own relationship to the visual construct in its own language. Bohatsch's works classically belong to abstract painting. But what does that mean? Does the gesture count? Does the line count? Does the colour count? It is a given that we cannot recognise any objects or subjects as such – not a teapot, for example, but also not a face – and this is what art history has called non-figurative painting. Instead, the focus is on the constructive and physical properties of a painting, primarily the colour, the brush, the format and the ground. And this is precisely

where Erwin Bohatsch comes in when he cites the texture of the surface as a central element of his work. His process begins with the choice of material – and the product he chooses also changes the way he tells his story. Whether he uses vinyl paint, charcoal or, in a mixture, oil, determines the composition, the path of a line, the porosity, opacity or density of a colour surface. His paintings thrive on the balancing of these different elements, their layering, overpainting and re-contouring.

In addition to the structural and material framework – the forms and the creation of an architectural spatial illusion – colour plays an eminent role as an evocative force in these works. The colour *is* the painting, even if this is hardly mentioned in conversation with the artist. However, I think that behind this reticence, alongside a possible scepticism towards the emotional content of painting, there is also an awareness of the impossibility of speaking about colour. But it is not least the colour to which these new works owe their validity and depth. In the subtle nuances of a blue that has gone completely out of fashion, or an irrational yellow, as well as in their particular weighting – often it is only tiny patches or dabs of colour that set an accent, as in the case of a small orange piece that appears between a blue-grey and a beige-white – there is an energetic charge that essentially determines the conception of the picture.

During my visit to Erwin Bohatsch's studio, there was a moment of pause – and that brings me to my little story. A pause, combined with the not particularly witty remark that these works reminded me of the US-American artist Richard Diebenkorn – a painter who represented the quintessence of painting for me as a teenager and who was always rather unknown in Europe compared to other exponents of Abstract Expressionism. And the surprise, which of course is no longer a surprise, was that Erwin Bohatsch also outed himself as a Diebenkorn fan – a coincidence that we both thought was remarkable.

Patricia Grzonka

Erwin Bohatsch, 1951 born in Mürzzuschlag (AT), lives and works in Vienna and Venice.