

Niele Toroni & Balthasar Burkhard

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by Samuel Gross

With this exhibition, Galerie Tschudi revisits one of the defining moments of a generation of Swiss art. In 1984, Balthasar Burkhard (1944 – 2010) and Niele Toroni (*1937) presented a joint exhibition at the Musée Rath in Geneva. The poster featured two black-and-white images, a brush and a camera, on a white background. No title, no possible comment other than the names of the two artists, is offered to mediate what might appear to be the coming together of two radically different positions. In the exhibition space, however, subtle interactions between these two artists' work quickly became apparent.

The large basement room in that show juxtaposed a series of photographs of human backs by Balthasar Burkhard with works on tracing paper by Niele Toroni. Five of these photographs and five of these paintings are now in the collection of the MAMCO in Geneva. The works by both artists, all in the same format, played on the notion of imprint and reproducibility so dear to certain art critics at the time. The exhibition thus established obvious semantic links between a precise practice of the medium of photography and a form of painting committed to radical detachment from notions of authorship and originality. Burkhard's fragmented, opaque reproduction of the body and Toroni's repeated recording of a gesture recurred throughout the exhibition. Our perception of the end of the act of painting, as suggested in Toroni's practice, is affected by the hypersensitivity of Burkhard's photographic mastery.

By emphasizing contrast, this historically important exhibition revealed the radical nature of both artist's practice. The current exhibition at Galerie Tschudi offers a version of the same experience. What is left to say? Perhaps just the following: Many other connections that go back 40 years are woven into this show. I won't, therefore, talk about a shared imaginary or a unifying dogma – I'm imagining stronger, simpler and stranger links. Given the distance between their practices, what we see here is a close friendship that brought these artists both solidarity and freedom. There may be a hint of nostalgia in what I'm writing, but what I wish to say is quite different: this exhibition is a reminder of the extent to which art is a space that allows us to transcend our identities, to escape from our dreams and forge new ones in a shared sense of excitement.

In this sense, Balthasar Burkhard's work is born from the practice of a demanding profession, which, at a pivotal moment in the history of art, attempts to capture the spirit of a whole new artistic generation. It's almost by chance that in the mid-1960s he finds himself in the circle of international artists then being presented at Kunsthalle Bern, whose new approaches to art he is very good at capturing in his photographic record of their landmark exhibitions. His technical perfection develops in the service of this explosion of new meaning. The formats of his images expand to an ever-larger scale, like an attempt to capture reality. Behind this perfect black and white, we follow him on sensitive journeys. Burkhard's work is a question of being in contact with the world – he was a photographer as others would be philosophers or poets, reflecting on photography as such, in all its history and its impact on us. His work is like a memory in the dark of travel, body and wonder, with images that open up like so much space that is still possible.

During the same period, Niele Toroni followed his ambition to reduce painting to its essence. As a member of the group BMPT (Buren, Mosset, Parmentier, Toroni), he engaged in provocation before later explaining that his practice, reduced to applying brushstrokes with a N°50 paintbrush at regular intervals of 30 centimeters, allows him to write an intimate diary. Toroni assumes the position of the poet, the extent of whose vocabulary interests us little, but whose fragments we cherish. In fact, an infinite series of signs is composed each time on the most diverse supports, from a sheet of newspaper to a wooden plaque, from a wall to a canvas. In Toroni's work, painting recovers a very direct link with us, like a letter seeking an addressee. It allows us to follow him as closely as he would like to be absent. He's like a friend whose footsteps, love and laughter we can trace in the marks they leave behind.

Friendship allows us to step outside ourselves, risking our own identity. This exhibition, featuring a very impressive view of Tokyo taken by Balthasar Burkhard in 2000, also recalls the very fine exhibition organized by Galerie Tschudi in Glarus in 2007, in which the two artists looked back at their shared perception of Japan, where they traveled together. This image shows a modern city, crossed by an elegant line forming an angle. Paradoxically, Tokyo itself becomes almost a sign, a written line. The megalopolis freezes in a single stroke. Between Balthasar Burkhard and Niele Toroni there is a certain way of thinking about tradition, time, repetition and contemplation that must surely have found an extraordinary echo chamber in their contact with Japanese culture.

Works of art are the expression of a shared moment, with an intensity akin to that of friendship. Here, that intensity is doubled.