

Within explanatory strategies currently available, the interpretation of a work of art — garnering significance and determining meaning — is an intricate process entangling the viewer with the viewed. The direct perceptual experience with the object mingles and mixes with the imaginative, rational and intuitive, which are perpetually shaped by memory, expectations, and analysis. In his paintings and drawings, Gaylen Gerber severely limits the apprehensibility of the specifics of his art simultaneously frustrating and acknowledging this interpretative process.

In the paintings, Gerber has restricted himself to painting and repainting, from the same view, the same common objects, in a narrow palette of gray. Within this abdication to a limited self-imposed program, Gerber discloses other systems that are present but less apparent in the making and viewing of things. The paintings at first appear to be monolithic grey sculptural objects-on-the-wall, in a minimalist tradition, placed equidistant from each other, creating a powerful theatrical presence. They, however, are drained of the aspirations towards an exclusive self-referentiality, as the viewer begins to notice the brush strokes, of different texture and finish, which emerge from their surfaces. Interplay of gloss and matte fragment the surface into pattern or field, historically referencing these genres which favor the flat surface of the canvas.

This systematic interpretation is in turn undermined, if one allows him/herself to continue the physical conversation. The absorptive quality of the paintings' mute grayness — ambivalently accepting interpretation — invokes the viewer to become equally absorptive. In a prolonged looking at the details, a faint representation appears: of bottles, cans, bowls, a glove, a scraper, scattered across a work bench. Gerber allows enough cues of reference for the paintings to operate within the system of traditional painting of mimicry of another "reality".

The artist has integrated the contradictory systems of romantic representation and existential abstraction, refusing their claims for mutual exclusivity. By denying any definitive interpretation, the work embraces many possibilities of interpretation. Being simultaneously operable in opposing systems, it discloses the systems' lack of closure. The viewer is urged to judge — not against standards of a given order — but rather to suspend the desire to fix the work, in favor of experience of it.

Never pure, this act of perception is informed by the mental analysis of reason, and more intuitively, by a continually amalgamated mass of perceptual memory. In the production of painting and repainting, Gerber repeatedly transcribed his subject, wherein previous experiences affected each rendering. Similarly, as one studies each picture, the accumulation of information, informs the understanding of the next and previous picture. By narrowing the amount of perceptual information Gerber allows sensory memory to easily enter the interpretative field.

Conversely, Gerber acknowledges, via frustration, the desire to own. In the face of a will-to-possess an original work of art, the grey paintings become simple same commodities,

offering neither style nor personal touch. Eluding a sexual craving for ownership, for grasping a fixed knowledge, the work splinters, refusing closure.

In his drawings, Gerber employs a different tactic to approach a parallel strategy: a splintering of systematized meaning in visual specifics. Here the artist collects images that have trafficked in the world in various forms. Their histories betray the obfuscating role of "representation" to inform, solicit, titillate, scandalize or humour. News portraits, catalog illustrations, pornography, cartoons, victims, rapists, and advertised commodities form part of the bank of pictures.

In the paintings, Gerber offered a rather "useless" image, allowing for a rich perceptual interchange full of possible significances. In the drawings, he selects pictures with specific meanings, that are specifically useful. In equivalent areas, Gerber traces the images in graphite onto paper. A constant pressure of the pencil describes without hierarchy enough information to visually describe the things depicted. Framed in the same plexiglass frames, the drawings sit on the bottom edge, and at a glance, appear to be minimalist objects declaring their physicality, or conceptual art-comments: blank pages of a sketchbook recording the emptiness of a reified existence. These readings, once again, are countered by the representations on the surfaces, urging the viewer to augment his/her preconceptions with a more intimate visual experience of the drawings. As the tracings congeal into recognizable representations, the viewer may become acutely aware of the very physical process of perception, physically moving the head, eyes, and body in order to fully apprehend the image.

The drawn pictures are simultaneously more specific than the painted images, and more general. Gerber's melange of subject matter, includes some which could be emotionally charged by a viewer's history with similar images, evoking a highly personal reaction. Gerber, in effect, illustrates how little information is required to illicit such response, and how crucial perceptual memory is to it. Yet by using common images, Gerber acknowledges their sameness; individual narratives cannot be differentiated without prior or extraneous knowledge. The drawings deflate the usefulness of local depiction, obscured or defined by too much detail, as well as that of the universalized one, generalized into symbol devoid of any potential for personalized meaning.

By intertwining given historical systems of representation within the perceptual fields of his art, Gaylen Gerber reveals the inadequacy of these systems to describe the complexities of the spheres that they propose to circumscribe. Allowing for the ambiguities to surface, the meaning of the work lies not in the ability of pictorial languages to describe, but in the viewer's willingness to ascribe a significance within a physical, emotional, intellectual, and mnemonic context. Though fraught with inefficacy, Gerber's work remains open. The failure to achieve a transcendental systematic becomes an acknowledgement of an existence within the continuing flux of interpretation.

Kathryn Hixson, 1990

Gaylen Gerber

GALERIE CHRISTINE ET ISY BRACHOT  
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