

## Gaylen Gerber



The artist, who lives in Chicago/Illinois, painted a whole series of gray, almost square pictures at the end of the 1980s, three of which are now displayed at the Neues Museum Weserburg Bremen. At first glance, these adjacent paintings appear as uniformly monochrome colored surfaces. However, a closer look reveals that despite their unifying character, the color surfaces show slight irregularities in many places. We are not dealing with a smooth, opaque coat of paint but rather with several carefully applied layers of color. Upon closer and more investigative observation, one gradually discovers differences between the seemingly uniform “gray in gray” images. Their practically smooth, slightly glossy surfaces, when viewed up close, show traces of the brush, subtle shadows, or initially difficult-to-realize spots, which surely cannot be purely accidental. The fact that it is not about the results of a “gestural” painting style but rather carefully applied homogeneous surfaces makes this constructive contradiction clear. What we see in these paintings, which represent nothing inside or outside of themselves, shows how Gerber deliberately built up his color fields. Layer by layer in an almost old-masterly yet simultaneously elaborate glazing technique.

If one does not immediately focus on the gray monochrome, they discover a variety of details that point to another reality beyond the purely visible painting. For example, miniature lines or oval shapes that seem reminiscent of the perspective-shortened edge of a bowl or cup. If one looks closely, such an oval phenomenon appears in the other two paintings as well. Our need to establish references and analogies quickly leads us to Cézanne’s still lifes: tables with vases, plates, bowls, and fruits. Yet these attempts to recognize or gain insights from objects prove to be doomed to failure. It is as though an impenetrable fog of color conceals everything these pictures might otherwise reveal.

Despite this gray density and initial doubts about one’s own perceptions, one ultimately cannot deny it: these paintings possess something of the “depth” of a spatial field of color, as found in classical positions like Constable or Turner, and finally from post-painterly abstraction. However, such noble references alone do not bring Gerber’s painting any closer. Moreover, it is difficult to speak of “space” at all here. Gray is still a non-color—a mixture of black and white, situated on the most extreme pole of the light-dark scale. It remains questionable whether something here reminds one of fog, smoke, or the trivial sense of a pre-stage of color. On the other hand, gray, due to its “neutrality,” possesses the ability to convey and highlight an affinity for stronger, more colorful tones. Yes, it could even encompass the three primary colors—red, yellow, and blue— and the mixed colors of orange, green, and violet, either subtly or faintly suggested.

Even here, the investigative gaze of the viewer might bring results to light while

simultaneously causing significant doubt. Is the faint hint of violet truly in these paintings, or is it caused by sunlight or even the overhead lighting? These questions alone elevate the viewing of the three paintings, which now appear as a conceptual unit, to a particular aesthetic experience. What might these paintings *contain*? What does their painterly density potentially conceal? By now, it becomes clear that Gerber does not rely on "painting" as such but essentially works like a conceptual artist, making the conditions of our perceptions the true theme. He poses the question of the subject, the theme, of "recognizability," ultimately addressing the problem of depictive representations in paintings. In the end, it is also about self-understanding and the internal necessity of painting as such, which, in such excellently painted works, is brought into discussion.

On the second floor of the museum is another work by Gerber, which confirms this conceptual approach and, at first glance, might appear weightless. "BACKDROP" refers to an installation, shaped like a large gray photo background that covers an entire wall. Such photo backgrounds are typically used in a studio to provide a neutral or homogeneous backdrop for the actual photographs. Think of the so-called blue-box effect, where a person or object in front of the camera can be isolated and combined with any digitally inserted background. Gerber's decision to choose a wall for this installation, one that might otherwise be avoided by other artists because it is far from an ideal museum wall, is contextually very interesting. When one examines this wall based on its architectural and functional foundations, it might even seem like a mistake to exhibit here. There are three doors: one leading to a restorer's magazine, the other two to the men's and women's restrooms. Fixed components like a telephone mounted on the gray surface, along with a red fire extinguisher, are also present. A motion detector, an alarm sensor, sockets, and light switches form further interruptions that could nearly drive an artist who wants to present paintings optimally to escape.

Gerber's interest here is, of course, in the wall as part of the space and as a place where art is exhibited. He focuses on the context in which images and sculptures are viewed. Additionally, we are in the museum's temporary exhibition area, where presentations of art are constantly changing.

These ever-changing presentations of art have also left their traces on this wall. The gray board is covered with marks, holes, small scratches on its surface, and sometimes tiny numbers from the numbering of a once-hung series of pictures. Now it is clear: Gerber, with his intervention, also signifies and marks the museum as an institution and confronts the viewer with the traces of its exhibition activity. One could even say that it is the institution and its conditions that become the true theme here. With its oversized offering of gray and the fact that nothing is depicted or represented, the space becomes almost consciously made as such.

There are factual memory traces in the form of mentioned holes and scratches, and there are also memories carried within by visitors familiar with the Neues Museum Weserburg Bremen. Provocative displays of nudes (Lynda Benglis, Kirsten Stoltmann, Wolfgang Tillmans) placed precisely between restroom doors, a series of Joseph Beuys graphics, and many other works that hung in front of this gray paper weeks or months prior. Here, in this conceptually designed overall view of various possibilities, and in the fact that BACKDROP serves as the *foil* on which art can be seen, there is a

connection to the three gray paintings. They, too, remain neutral, yet within them, traces emerge that point to other works, the context of art operations, and the history of art itself. Allowing this participation—images as the basis and backgrounds for the experience of other works—is what BACKDROP and the oil paintings have in common. The conscious engagement with the wall, the space, and the museum conditions for the perception of art generally make Gaylen Gerber's work conceptual art that does not exclude painting— indeed, in great completion.

**Peter Friese**

Chief Curator of Neues Museum Weserburg Bremen