

When Helmut Federle created his work “Liegendes H (1)” (Reclining H) in 1979, he developed a composition that he would later vary in his series “Basics on Composition”, most of which was made in 1992. 40 years after painting the first picture, he decided to revisit it again in 2019. The first work, which he painted during his time in New York and whose form is based on the first letter of his first name, has become a kind of iconic feature of his artistic practice that apparently refuses to loosen its grip on him. We used Federle’s resumption of the series this year as an occasion to organize this exhibition. The current “Basics on Composition” mark the beginning of a new phase of painting after a hiatus of five years.

In his “Basics on Composition”, Federle returns to the tradition of geometric abstraction, but renews and expands it as a field of tension in which to research the relationship between figure and ground, order and chaos, movement and calmness. The bars of the “Liegende H (1)” and the two squares formed by the open ends on the left and right are transformed into individualized, geometric planes of equal value that continually reverse the traditional relationship between figure and ground, while rejecting balance and closure. “Federle has destabilized the square, its solid form, and turned it into something that no longer represents authority. His squares are defined by their relationship to the space around them. His compositions are decidedly non-hierarchical” (John Yau, 1993).

The power of the now almost 70 variations of this motif, always in the small format of 40 x 50 cm, derives from their strong emotional presence, which can be quiet, or sometimes almost “sassy.” The colors selected for the squares range from yellow, to yellow-green, to green, and sometimes include, though rarely, a light brown. The surfaces of the squares are occasionally sometimes opaque; other times we can see the traces of a brush. In one instance, two different shades of yellow-green are used in the same picture. In another picture, the boundaries between the squares and the H are sharply drawn; in yet another, they seem to vibrate. The dark bars of the reclining H are often divided into shiny and matte segments, into black and dark gray or black and red areas. The H also becomes an upside-down L, exposing three red rectangles that are referred to in the subtitle as “Three Owls”. The work “Basics on Composition D (Red Scorpion/Hühnerstall)” from 2019 is so far the only picture in this series in which the H is rendered solely in red.

Gestural additions to the dark bars as well as to the squares reach across the defined margins to express Federle’s “Desviaciones,” his sometimes lyrical, sometimes defiant elements in the system of geometric abstraction. He defines his painting as “vegetative” and “climatic.” Many of his works in the “Basics on Composition” series have subtitles or dedications. While these may not help to understand the pictures’ content directly, they serve as associative aids and inspiration for understanding Federle’s cosmos – how he approaches the world he lives in – which accompanies

and defines his work. They are dedicated to moments of a journey to Japan, to American Anabaptist sects, to the Navajo people, to Japanese sword fighters, to tea masters, and even to a profane chicken coop, to keep things from getting too sublime. “The Horizon of the Seven Lakes” makes multiple perceptions possible.

In addition to Federle’s large format works, many of these small icons can be found in numerous museums – for example, the MUDAM in Luxemburg, Kunstmuseum Bonn, MAMCO in Geneva, Musée d’art moderne et contemporain in St. Etienne, Kunstmuseum Basel, Fonds M—Marco in Marseille, Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg, and Kunsthau Bregenz.

Helmut Federle was born in Solothurn, Switzerland, in 1944. He lives and works in Vienna and Tuscany. In 1997, he represented Switzerland at the 47th Venice Biennale. He was professor of painting at the Kunstakademie Düsseldorf from 1999 to 2007. He was awarded the Prix Aurélie Nemours in 2008 and the Ricola Collection Prize in 2016.

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