

Hans-Jörg Clement in Conversation with Christian Faul

Reduce, Abstract: Create

In your work, the viewer is confronted with floral motifs, clouds, or koi. Do you feel comfortable with people describing your work as representational painting?

It's certainly true that my motifs recall specific things or are connected to the things we know from our reality.

But the things illustrated don't seem realistic.

They aren't illustrations. I don't seek to illustrate something I have seen because it has fascinated me per se. I alter figures and forms and bring things together that we do not really encounter as such. I abstract something from reality. The palette often deviates clearly from the model in reality as well. I find a representational motif in order to make it work for me.

And that means ...

... that the thing seen does not mean the thing illustrated.

Have you ever considered painting abstractly, or could you ever develop in the direction of abstract painting?

The abstract always plays a role in my works.

In terms of form or content?

For me there is no abstract painting per se, just as ultimately there is no representational painting per se either.

How does the rejection of these categories affect your own painting?

I try to overcome them.

Always?

Yes. When I applied to the academy, I submitted, among other things, a painting with color fields and a dead bird floating in front of them. At the time Hans Peter Reuter, who was to become my teacher, spoke of a Mondrian on which someone had placed a dead bird. In my

works prior to and during my student years I repeatedly painted geometrically articulated color fields with somewhat real objects placed above or in front of them.

Was that a deliberate compositional act that you abandoned at some point?

No. Even today these two poles, if you want to call them that, are still present in my works; they just aren't as obviously intertwined. The surrounding space sometimes becomes a blank surface but is nevertheless one with the painting and no longer separate as it was in the beginning. There is a constant turn toward the abstract in my oeuvre. My visual idiom is really one of reduction and abstraction.

This pictorial understanding can be seen particularly well in your cloud paintings.

Yes. Sometimes they are works based on horizontally layered color spaces of different weight that merge into one another; they are based on actual cloud formations, yet they become color field painting. In the end, a painting is inherently something very abstract and yet it also has something very real.

I also find it interesting that there is no abstract painting in Japanese art, at least not in the way we understand it.

The visualization of an object is already abstraction.

Your choice of a support is already a deviation from the classical tableau (canvas on a stretcher) and gives your works an object-like quality. Is it connected to sculpture in your view?

From the time I began painting on stretchers, I was never really satisfied with the support. It was a support in the literal sense: not really part of the work.

So the support had to be integrated into the creative act?

It was clear to me that I never wanted to frame my works. I didn't want to create a window. It was never my goal to produce an illusion on a canvas but rather something autonomous, to create a whole. So very early on I began to experiment with doubled sheets of fiberboard, then later wood panels and panes of acrylic glass as a way to develop autonomous objects ...

... which create space in the best sense of that phrase and extend the painterly dimension.

They deliberately loom into the space and thus create, alongside the illusionistic spatial depth of painting, a real, supporting spatiality that the painting offers the viewer.

But you've gone even further.

I associated painting with plastic works and, among other things, positioned them as objects on the floor in the space, so that the transition to sculpture remained fluid. On the other hand, there are plastic works that in turn have a lot of painterly qualities.

Whether object or sculpture, what relationship to space should your works have?

It varies. There are paintings created in such a way that they loom into the surrounding space because of their objecthood. In the process of creating it, the space that the work occupies is an abstract space that cannot be more closely defined. Because at that point I don't know where I will present my work, it's primarily about a spatial connection that the painting establishes to its surroundings and to the viewer. Later, in an exhibition, the work's spatial connection can be taken up and reinforced by the way it is hung. In a given case, an intertwining of pictorial space and object with the surroundings can result; the object and its surroundings become wrapped up in each other.

And then there are works created especially for a specific space.

For example?

At the invitation of the Kunstverein Drensteinfurt, I developed a work that consisted of a cloud painting, a wall, chandeliers, and a bench.

The Kunstverein uses a small former synagogue as an exhibition space, which exists today only as an empty memory stripped of all its furnishings.

Where the Ark of the Law was once located, I placed a terminating wall with a round arch and a circular, bipartite cloud painting inscribed on it. The shape cloud formation was reminiscent of a brown mob breaking through the door but could also be read as darkness withdrawing. The chandeliers hanging just above the floor referred to Reichskristallnacht (the so-called Night of Broken Glass) and also provided light in the empty space. Moreover, viewers could sit down on a bench and become immersed in the installation as a whole while viewing the cloud painting.

Would you consider a contextual connection so important that your works could result in a false connection?

I've never had the feeling my work has really been misunderstood. Nor can I recall being represented in such an exhibition context. Theoretically, a work could be out of place in an exhibition context, but it would not harm the quality of the work, since that is free of context.

You have shown an interest in, among other things, Far Eastern philosophy. Can you describe your understanding of contemplation?

I see contemplation as first and foremost a nondirected yet conscious immersion in an activity that is both physically and mentally active: a perceptive immersion in both a literal and a metaphorical sense. It is really a very rational thing, but one in which reason recedes to the background.

When you speak of a nondirected activity in this context, it naturally brings to mind the purposelessness of art. Do you see your works as having a contemplative function, and are they intended to be contemplative for the viewer?

I would emphasize both things. Recurring activities liberate one from singularly demanding concentration on the activity as such. For me, the painting is already finished in my mind's eye when I make the first brushstroke.

That corresponds completely to the philosophy of archery in Zen or the original idea of fly fishing: the person doing it knows from the first moment, long before the ritualized action takes place, that the completed act will happen.

I see it that way as well. The painting process is thus a necessary process, but also one that has to be repeated in order to make the mental visible. The creative process is therefore more an act of execution. My understanding of contemplation applies to this form of immersion in work, among other things.

And the viewer?

Because this is so necessary and important for me, I would consider a successful work one where the viewer feels something of this as well. I would like to lead him or her to an accelerated observation in which the work and the viewer are no longer opposites but become a whole, as happens for me in the painting process, when the painting, the space, and I fuse.

I'd like to return to the feeling of the paintings. The palette clearly plays a particular role, especially in the interplay of the background and the motif. How do you choose the colors?

Now I collect nearly all my motifs myself using a camera. But you cannot predict when a motif will become the motif for a painting. Sometimes I use it immediately, sometimes years pass, and sometimes I never do.

When a painting comes together for me out of the found and retained material, the combination of colors is also immediately clear to me. The discovery of an image and the color composition are thus so immediate for me that I could probably not explain more clearly how they come together.

Sometimes I then make sketches from collages of my materials for paintings, sometimes reworking them in gouache, or I make written notes, to aid my memory; often I then come up with ideas for several works around the same time and they cannot be realized so quickly.

There are cycles in which a certain selection of colors dominates.

In retrospect, it is possible to see phases in my work in which certain selections of colors dominate. For example, in the koi paintings, the nearly black backgrounds gave way to almost white ones. During my scholarship residency at the Cité des Arts in Paris, I produced only flower paintings with white flowers, and since moving to Berlin my paintings and color spaces have become brighter and in some cases slightly glimmering. It's all a very intuitive act.

When do you realize that a work is finished?

When my inner painting, which is already painted, as it were, corresponds to the real one.

How specific are your ideas before you begin painting? Is there an autonomy of the work of art for you, and, if so, how is it documented?

Yes, I do think the artwork follows its own rules.

When an idea is really strong, it will prevail. I don't really have any influence over what develops. I can only execute it the way it was before the painting began. The idea is very specific in relation to the finished painting. The painting wants to be painted.

And the viewer?

It establishes its own rules for the viewer as well. In that sense, inherent in the work is a guideline for viewing it; the reason it doesn't speak to everyone, at least not directly, is connected to these inherent rules. While selecting the image and in the process of producing it, the work and I are all there is.

What role does the idea of a series play in the history of your oeuvre?

It depends how you define series, of course. Do floral motifs, clouds, and koi alone constitute series?

Some motifs cannot be exhausted with a single painting. So groups of two, three, or more works result, and sometimes that can continue for years. Now and again something is taken up again or intertwined with something else. And there may even be an effort to counter the fast living of our day with something that endures.

That intimation suggests a sociopolitical concern. Can you name a specific example?

In Zwischen Himmel und Erde (Between heaven/sky and earth) of 1999 in the St. Sebald Church in Nuremberg, the cloud paintings hung in various places in the church are based on a single cloud motif. The works were then sold separately under the title Ein Stück Himmel (A piece of heaven/sky), making it a work that is connected, even as it is distributed through the world, since the individual paintings are located not only in Europe but also in Japan and the United States. Each owner is thus aware of having part of a larger whole.

Consciously or unconsciously, every artist belongs in an art historical context. Where do you place yourself, or, to put it another way, are there points of reference, fascinations?

I place myself in the present. I see myself very clearly as a contemporary artist, reacting to my living environment and contemporary developments. This is not obviously immanent in my work, but it is present. I see the points of reference primarily in the Western hemisphere of the recent past, in the rather broadly discussed color-field painters of the past century, in the Bauhaus, especially in architecture's approach to space and the plane, and sometimes too in Neue Sachlichkeit (New objectivity), modern dance, and also in contemporary classical music. There is also the admiring gaze backward: to the Renaissance and to painters such as Bronzino, Pontormo, and Vermeer, each of whom employed a very unique, fascinating palette.

Naturally Asia plays a role as well. You have traveled there repeatedly ...

... naturally: the Asian world, especially Japan. That is a country and a culture that fascinate me particularly. I see points of reference in the Japanese art of past centuries but also today, especially with regard to an approach with space and void. Not just in the fine arts but also in garden design and other traditional Japanese arts such as ikebana, calligraphy, Noh, and tea ceremonies.

Ritual plays a crucial role in Asian culture. Are there rituals that shape your work?

No. Personally, I am not a great fan of ritual. For me, ritual carries with it a risk that is more about the outward form than about the content.

Is coming to terms with recent contemporary painting relevant to your work? Is there a contemporary artist who interests you?

Of course, because it is important to see what's going on around you, both in terms of formal solutions and coming to terms with content. My interest is not limited to fellow painters but includes all realms of art. But I also need time to withdraw into my studio in order to dedicate myself entirely to my work.

Can you give an example of a recent work that you found particularly moving?

The last work that moved me a lot was Imi Knoebel's exhibition at the Neue Nationalgalerie in Berlin. The paintings on the windows of the upper hall represented extremely credible and moving work; it was painting that was ephemeral and yet very material, an entirely new experience of the space; painting that was at once image and space.

Moreover, by painting the surfaces of the windows he perfected the architecture, especially if we recall that Mies van der Rohe's building was very much influenced by the Japanese concept of space and architecture from the fifteenth to the eighteenth century.

If you were to be invited to participate in an interdisciplinary cooperation, would you choose to work with words (that is, with a writer) or with sounds (that is, with a musician)?

In principle I would say sound is closer to me, for the simple reason that it too can get by without words. Having two positions without words seems to me to be the more interesting challenge.

Your reservations about language are evident in this interview generally. Where do you see language's inability? Or what can sound and painting do that language cannot? Does poetic language achieve nothing for you?

For me, images and sounds are the primary impressions, while language develops only in a subsequent process. Of course I recognize the value of poetic language, but in general words quickly reach their limits for me. They are quickly pinned down. Images and sounds remain more open.

Can you identify a motif or theme that runs through all your works, whether open or hidden?

Space as time is perhaps a good conceptual approach, with all its forms and non-forms, phenomena and nonphenomena. What is time, what is not time, how do we relate to it. Timelessness, stepping out of time. A lifespan, infinity, a section, an in-between, a becoming, a being, a remaining, a not.

I am also thinking of the idea of space as a filled void, as it was taken up in an exhibition in Wolfsburg in 2007–8 that considered the relationship between Japanese and Western art. But there it is again: the limitation of language!

What moves you to try repeatedly to overcome a white surface?

For me, painting paintings is my form of communication. It is a necessity, like breathing, eating, and sleeping. We can go without it for a short or longer period, but not entirely. The white surface does not entail a horror vacui, even if the first brushstroke is sometimes difficult and takes some effort.

If someone were to take your brushes and paints from you, what would you do?

I'd buy new ones! Whenever some situation prevents me from getting to my studio for an extended period, something is missing for me, and I have to make sure I change it as quickly as possible.

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