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__drowned in Light

Thoughts on Christian Faul's work on the occasion of the „ __lichtgetrunken“ exhibition at the oechsner galerie, Nuremberg, 2008

Still lifes of flowers have a long tradition in the history of art, and they are among the works whose timeless splendor still enchants us. They are, however, rare in contemporary painting. Their vast beauty seems to frighten artists, and the harsh judgment that only flawed beauty is acceptable has dominated the art scene for years. The classical ideals of beauty seem old-fashioned and superficial. Christian Faul does not let such prejudices stop him. He does not shrink from being associated with the great masterpieces of this genre. A comparison immediately reveals that Faul's painting pursues other issues and goals as, say, Impressionism.

In 1890 Vincent van Gogh painted a large bouquet of bluish violet irises against a bright lemon yellow background. He achieved a fabulous explosion of color, in which the flickering flowers react to the complementary colors of the background, lending the painting great tension. We experience Christian's depiction of similar irises very differently. Delicately and gracefully, quietly and discreetly, the flowers snake from the edge into the center of the painting. The opposition between the modes of these two still lifes could not be greater. Yet they have a central point in common. For both artists, the irises have a meaning none other than an aesthetic one. Van Gogh chose his motifs based on the tension of the contrasts of color and form; Christian Faul paints precious objects, finding inspiration in such things as flowers and blossoms.

Thus it comes as no surprise that Christian Faul does not paint from nature but rather from photographs. He does not embed the magic of flowers in landscapes or interiors. His backgrounds are the result of purely aesthetic considerations. The flowers float in a color space conceived for them alone. The blue background in some of his paintings does not reproduce a sky or body of water but results solely from Faul's imagination, from his subtle deliberations on which shades will produce an overall harmony.

The task of the imaginary background is to make the flowers seem even more precious and to heighten their effect. This can be achieved by a kind of tone-on-tone painting, as with the delicate pink of the tulips, but also by stronger chiaroscuro contrasts. All of the paintings feature a matte translucence and also reveal many shadings on closer inspection. A delicate shimmer like mother-of-pearl comes through, producing lively surfaces.

Christian Faul employs an elaborate, time-consuming glazing technique. He superimposes many thin layers of paint or wipes them, resulting in a slightly iridescent ground that seems alive. The luminance is also heightened by a special preparation of the support: Christian Faul uses sandblasted acrylic glass, with high edges on the side that result in a kind of light box. The light comes from the front, but it is reflected back into the painting off the white wall behind it. In his most recent floral paintings, he places a sheet of aluminum behind the glass, so that the picture's support looks lighter and seems to float, even though it undermines the play of light from behind. Christian Faul titled his most recent presentation at

the Oechsner Galerie __*lichtgetrunken* (drowned in light), and it would be difficult to come up with a nicer term for his works. The paintings are indeed drowned in the surrounding light. The soft contours, the gentle vibrations in the color plane produce a flickering impression. The paintings seem to float in space; they are borne by the light. The concept of light painting, which again seems to point to Impressionism, takes on a new meaning in Faul's work, in that the light itself becomes a component of his paintings.

But is it accurate to describe Christian Faul's paintings in terms of the spatial concept of foreground and background? If he creates spaces of light and color as just described, it is something other than the perspectival spatial situations composed by Van Gogh, for example. The concept of background presumes that the artist is painting an illusionistic space. Hence there is a foreground (the flowers, apparently) and a background (the monochromatic plane) intended to suggest spatiality. But is that the case in Christian Faul's work?

The irises do indeed emerge in three-dimensions and stand out clearly against the plane, but the effect does not correspond to the illusionistic effect of flowers in a room. The work lacks the depth that would create an illusionistic space. Is it not rather the case that the flowers and the monochromatic plane are of equal value? In Faul's work, the spatiality is created by the support: the works move away from the wall and float in space. The painting itself becomes a three-dimensional object, but that which is painted follows its own laws.

Another important characteristic of his flower still lifes is their cropping. The flowers always protrude into the painting from the side or even from the top. For the most part, the blossoms are all that is seen. Christian Faul does not produce a botanical panorama and, although it seems he depicts the flowers exactly and in such detail, he does not feel constrained by mimesis. The artist alters scales and arranges the flowers according to his own ideas. They are simply aesthetic decisions, and they have a lot in common with abstract painting, making it clear that for Christian Faul the flowers represent simply an occasion to paint and not the subject matter.

He is interested in the balance of color, in the subdivision of the pictorial space, in the pictorial axes and the change that results when one component is varied. That is because certain factors are predefined for him. Christian Faul prefers certain formats and chooses a specific support based on the motif. In the case of his flower paintings, it is usually acrylic glass. Forms and colors are the true protagonists of his paintings. The artist seeks delicate transitions and harmonious symbioses. The flowers offer him a rich store of colors and forms from which to choose. There are the round corollas of the tulips but also the drop-shaped racemes of laburnum. The point is to define the relationship of emptiness (specifically, the monochromatic plane) to fullness (the colorful flowers).

Fullness and emptiness are key terms for Christian Faul's art, and they open up a connection to Japanese aesthetics that cannot be overestimated in his work. The painter lived in Japan for a year and has since then shown an interest in traditional Japanese culture, as expressed, for example, in tea ceremonies.

"Form is emptiness; emptiness is form" is the core idea of the so-called heart sutra. The "sutra of the essence of wisdom" is one of the most famous texts of Mahayana Buddhism, and it became a principle of Zen in the seventh century. "Form is emptiness; emptiness is form" describes an insight that is difficult to grasp in terms of Western ideas; it is achieved by a chain of simultaneous being and nonbeing, object and non-object. Western rational thinking always distinguishes between mind and matter, being and nothingness, the drawing and the drawn, form and content. It is difficult to grasp a thing in terms of its being-as-it-is. In the concept of emptiness, the East discovered a way of being that overcomes the dualistic thinking of subject and object. Many rituals and meditations help one to approach this state of being-as-it-is.

The intertwining of form and void and the idea of the absolute found an appropriate calligraphic symbol in the East in the ninth century: the “empty” circle rendered on a blank ground with a single brushstroke—known as an *ensō* in Japanese. The French sinologist François Jullien has called the *ensō* a “square without corners” and recognized it as a basic formula in Chinese painting.¹

A “square without corners”—a coincidence or the expression of this aesthetic? Christian Faul’s supports always have rounded edges; thus they dispense with all sharp edges and underscore their inner harmony.

Eastern painting never really abandoned the recognizably figurative. Thus it has no nonobjective painting like that of Western modernism. But that is precisely what we need to understand: although there are clearly identifiable motifs, they are not the theme of the painting. The same is true of the painting of Christian Faul, who only seems to be occupied with the long history of Western art but is in fact concerned with other, Eastern models.

Thirty spokes meet at a hollowed-out hub;
the wheel won’t work without its hole.
A vessel is molded from solid clay;
its inner emptiness makes it useful.
To make a room, you have to cut doors and windows;
without openings, a place isn’t livable.

To make use of what is here,
you must make use of what is not.²

Notes

1 On the Japanese aesthetic and its influence on Western art, see *Japan and the West: The Filled Void*, exh. cat., Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg (Cologne: DuMont, 2007).

2 *The Tao Te Ching of Lao Tzu* (ca. 4th century BC), trans. Brian Brown Walker (New York: Macmillan, 1996), 11.