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“...to be a perfect echo”

Christian Faul paints flowers, paints fish, paints clouds. He paints them so magnificently, with the glaze surfaces of an old master, that he is sure to meet the approval of those who believe that the bravura of craft ensures good art. If all he cared about were pretty pictures, however, he would not be worth mentioning. What is it, then, that distinguishes his art?

To begin with, there is his sense for the painting's support. A painting is a strange thing. Half material, half immaterial image. A peculiar hybrid of the real, projecting volume of the support and illusionistic, receding space of the painting. The classical, framed painting is designed to make us forget its hybrid existence. His frame covers the edges and sides of the support. All that remains is a painted surface that is perceived like an opening. A window through which we gaze into other realities.

Christian Faul's supports, by contrast, are very deep and are left unframed. Whether made of wood or Plexiglas, they always look like boxes that hold the painting away from the wall a bit. This distance and the lack of a frame make it impossible to forget that, to quote a famous dictum by the painter Maurice Denis: “before it is a warhorse, a female nude, or some anecdote, a painting is essentially a planar surface covered with colors.” Hence Christian Faul's paintings come out toward the viewer, only to withdraw again into the painting at the same time. Thus it is not simple to determine where that “planar surface” lies—not even for the painter, particularly when he paints on satin Plexiglas grounds. When will the brush touch the surface? And why should it be any different for the painter?

We have not yet mentioned the rounded corners of Christian Faul's paintings. It is a solution that harmonizes beautifully with the voluminous formations of his supports. Why? Because they emphasize in turn the material existence of the painting. The rounded corners flatter the eye just as a well-formed handle flatters the hand. Is it not the case that the strict rectangle of the usual pictorial field tends to draw attention away from the material side of a painting? Is it not that case that the geometrically exact form tends to point to the sphere of the Euclidian intellectual and immaterial? And conversely, when painters liberate the canvas from the convention of the rectangle, transforming the painting's support into a “shaped canvas,” does it not tend to foreground more strongly the painting as a thing?

Christian Faul's paintings are always both things at once: thing and painting. Anyone who steps before them will experience the conflict of two irreconcilable kinds of perception. Either I stick with the real object of the thing on the wall with its painted surface or I see the objects of the paintings. It is like atom physics, but instead of wave and atomic particle we have thing and painting. It is not as if it would be different with any other painting, but Christian Faul articulates this dualism. He is not simply forced to take it into account, he makes it the theme of his art. In

this he is very much a child of his time, who scrutinizes the process of making paintings in all its conceivable aspects.

But isn't it anachronistic to paint flowers, fish, and clouds? And what it is about this exoticism whose chrysanthemums and koi keep leading us away to Japan? Christian Faul, I suspect, finds something in Japanese culture that has repeatedly attracted Western intellectuals at least since the Second World War. In 1959 Umberto Eco dedicated an essay titled "Lo Zen e l'Occidente" to the phenomenon. Zen Buddhism was being discovered by the Beatniks at that time. Admittedly, their anarchistic, anti-intellectual interpretation of Zen has little to do with Christian Faul's art. The artist is surely more interested in—to use the language of the time—square Zen, in orthodox Zen.

Christian Faul's painting reflects this occupation on different levels: Iconographically, by means of the pictorial motifs mentioned above, whose precious isolation from any narrative recalls the time the tea master Rikyu received General Hideyoshi at his tea house. Rikyu had plucked all the bindweed that was blossoming on the garden hedge beforehand but had selected just a few to decorate a modest space the size of two tatami mats. Compositionally, Christian Faul follows the lead of Japanese art in his refined asymmetries and a highly developed sense of pictorial spaces in which filled and empty sections are seen as equal in value. Space is not just a vessel for the things in it but their matrix, as Eco put it so beautifully. Space in the sense of the Japanese word *ma*, which means "interval" or "interstice." It is a term from a period in which Japanese culture did not yet distinguish between space and time.

In the end Christian Faul's art demands both from him as painter and from us as viewers something that could best be described, if the term were not so hackneyed, as *meditation*. That need not exclude Western, historical reflection, however. We are left with the question of why a young painter would work like this today. My answer is: because in Japan's mirror he secures himself one of the central lines of development in High Modernist and contemporary Western art history and the history of ideas: the calling into question of the artistic subject, which first cast doubt on the necessity of self-expression and then rejected intentionality entirely and exposed identity as a construct. It is a long historical process with an infinite number of facets that forms the resonance cavity for Christian Faul's painting. This development is echoed in the way the artist works. The visible world passes through him as he withdraws in silence. In the process the world is transformed into stunningly beautiful paintings that leave behind the photographic material that serves him as a starting point in lieu of sketches. Consequently, Christian Faul has emphasized repeatedly that his work is not about a reflection on the medium by means of photographic realism.

Kafka and Cézanne may be evoked here as chief witnesses to an outlook in which Christian Faul might recognize himself. It is an attitude that is both modern and close to that of Zen Buddhism. In "Reflections on Sin, Suffering, Hope, and the True Way" Franz Kafka wrote: "There is no need for you to leave the house. Stay at your table and listen. Don't even listen, just wait. Don't even wait, be completely quiet and alone. The world will offer itself to you to be unmasked; it can't do otherwise; in raptures it will writhe before you."¹ And Cézanne once said: "What would you think of idiots who would tell you, the painter is always inferior to nature! They are parallel, if the artist doesn't intentionally intervene [. . .]. His entire will must be silent. He must silence all prejudice within himself. He must forget, be quiet, be a perfect echo."

Notes

1. Franz Kafka, "Reflections on Sin, Suffering, Hope, and the True Way" (no. 109), in idem, *The Blue Octavo Notebooks*, trans. Ernst Kaiser and Eithne Wilkins (Cambridge, MA: Exact Change, 1991), 54.

2. *Conversations with Cézanne*, ed. Michael Doran, trans. Julie Lawrence Cochran (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 2001), 111.