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"The discourse about the things is often more important than the things themselves."

A conversation by Michael Krajewski.

Michael Krajewski: Somebody expecting an ordinary exhibition of paintings from you will be surprised. The catalogue for example presents three different bodies of work. Is there, in your view, something that links these - as regards content or form?

Sven Drühl: Basically the thought of searching for causes to go on painting at all, because essentially I mistrust painting. I get no ideas for subjects while painting, that is I stand in the studio and don't know what to paint because of the sheer pressure of spontaneity. Also I don't believe that it works like this. Even those who pretend to work this way bring the subject with them to the studio. I consider the three bodies of work you are talking about - the carpets, the test cards and the art historical subjects - to be conceptual painting.

M.K.: Do you work on the different series at the same time, or have they been created gradually, with different causes for each of them?

S.D.: One after the other. I had carried out the test cards already once on a small scale in 1993/94, and I felt that this subject was so solid and multi-layered, that for years I toyed with the idea of carrying this to extremes once again. On the one hand I like this ironizing of colour field or striped paintings that exist in countless variations. I thought the subject would be excellently suitable for carrying this form of declaration in painting to the absurd. Besides "test card" is really there as lettering in the painting, meaning at the same time not to take oneself and the work all too seriously. Nevertheless I have to get into the tiresome lengthy process that painters of striped paintings also go through, because I have to really place these funny stripes and consider carefully which colours to choose.

M.K.: It is a matter of composition then?

S.D.: Of course, but one can never really evade that, even if one approaches the thing conceptually. That has partly even been the attraction of it. The carpets work quite similarly. I stopped this labour of patience, which doesn't suit me anyway, after 7 paintings though, because I didn't want to go on painting like this; I didn't feel like adding individual colours with a small brush any longer, first all the red spots, then all the blue spots etc..., that was long-winding and absolutely nerve-racking. I would have liked best to pay someone to save me the work. But the subject is still going round in my mind, so that just now I'm tackling new carpet pictures. White on white and black on black, so that one can only perceive them as relief in side view.

M.K.: Has your idea of artistic work changed since then? You have very casually expressed the wish to commission the precision work.

S.D.: That is difficult because somehow self-torment and endurance are a necessary part of it. If I commissioned somebody, he instead of me would have to make decisions in front of the picture, even if I had everything thought-out conceptually in advance as precisely as possible. In the end it's down to applying colour and I have to decide for myself to do this orderly or trashy for example.

M.K.: Is painting in your opinion the medium of art that still promises a non-alienated artistic work process?

S.D.: We're far away from that. I'm absolutely aware that I could commission someone and still have the work presented as mine. As an artist I don't necessarily have to take action myself today, but that has never been really attracting me, because I just like painting too much. I often say about myself that I can't paint at all, and then I search for solutions that can be reached without having to be able to paint in the classical, academic sense. So I look for ways out in order to swing the brush anyhow. At the same time I criticize painting and think that nowadays one really shouldn't paint any more. But that holds the problem that I also don't want to do anything else. It would be very easy to use a video camera just for the hipness of it. Today everything is shown by artists if they only work with video. The spirit of the times is somewhere else, but nevertheless I paint. What ultimately matters is the eye, i.e. not to simply paint a pathetic landscape, but – if such a handed-down subject is approached at all – to transform it. This way I arrived at the new works, as I have always tried to use existing pictures. To use carpets, test cards and now art historical subjects simply suggests itself. It's not that I think of the subjects, they jump at me.

M.K.: I think especially these art historical paintings are virtuoso. I find it surprising that chance plays a relatively big though restricted role while the "composition" is completely predetermined. On the one hand it is simple copying, something that artists did in past centuries in order to develop their artistic abilities, on the other hand you give way to the game, the melting of the materials.

S.D.: Yes, there's no other way of getting there, you can't just copy a Hodler or an outstanding figure like Friedrich. Selecting them is problematic enough already. I'm concerned with a kind of contemporary reinterpretation of painting with simultaneous avoidance of painting. That's the conceptual approach.

M.K.: So you accept chance?

S.D.: Yes, but only within certain limits. If I didn't place these silicone separators I would have no control over the lacquer. I have often tried that in the past, only then a hill was not a hill but mere sludge. I'm interested in how far one can help chance along and still recognizably transform the picture one has chosen as initial subject.

The system “picture“ is gone through, and in detail it is then completely different from the original, the colours are different, the forms, virtuosity is faked. If I paint in oils then that’s a cliché of painting so to speak, some patches in the Sea of Ice for example, that is painted like Immendorf – thick in thick – or like Krieg. But that’s not really virtuoso, Hodler and his lot could do much better than that. This is not about skill either but about the discourse about skill.

M.K.: The painter tries to get different formal aspects into a certain satisfying relation, maybe a balance. Which means that in a functioning painting everything is related to everything. While working on a painting one can change or destroy the whole with one detail. That makes the work so hard and so challenging.

S.D.: But that is not what challenges me, and insofar I'm not a painter. I see myself more as a conceptualist acting in the medium painting. I include the theoretical debate, i.e. in the paintings I examine to what extent the discourse, the talking about the things, is almost more important than the things themselves. For example this stupid virtuosity debate. But also the functioning, consistent or successful painting etc.; the conceptualizations themselves are quite questionable. This success can't be planned; it depends not only on oneself, it's coincidence. If I dab around in a painting thick in thick, and the painting is consistent in the end, then I don't really know the ultimate reason for that. At some point I stop and I know this is a nice piece of work and I'm surprised.

M.K.: One could also see it the other way round: The ones you select as models have taken the problem seriously, and you wouldn't have chosen them, if you weren't sure that they have coped with it.

S.D.: Sure. But that's also a bit of a punk rock attitude. I'm all the more determined to take those paintings that will necessarily make me fail in copying. In addition there are thoughts about the question, if the selected painting is composed in such a way that it suits my technique; I could not take Liebermann for example even though I think he's great. The colours are mixed together so much that I can place no dividing lines. So I have to fall back on Hodler, who works very graphically, or Kirchner's late works or Monet. I would never take a painter I consider to be bad or of whom I think that this fight doesn't show in the painting.

M.K.: If it is a matter of conceptual proceedings, then the experimental aspect is not that important to you?

S.D.: It is important, but only in detail. The task of transforming Monet's water-lilies in painting requires experimenting, either I paint them the way he has painted them or I have to go through a few small canvases to find out how they should look. That's the experiment on a small scale. The entire approach is the experiment on a large scale.