

Published in: Sven Drühl / Stefan Wissel: Poplieferanten, modo-Verlag, Freiburg 2004

Martin Engler
Painting: a User's Manual

The art of the puzzle begins (...), when instead of allowing chance to cover the tracks, he remembers to mark the spot with the stratagem, the trap, the illusion.
George Perec (i)

As is generally known, painters have a harder time of it than other artists. Their *raison d'être*, namely painting, is buried and proclaimed resurrected faster than the eye can see, let alone the hand write. Finding one's way is particularly difficult during one of painting's heydays. In the varied stylistic mix found in the ubiquitous major shows devoted to contemporary painting, between strokes and drips, abstract and figurative, self-reflection and newfound sensuality, virtuosity and 'bad painting', the question as to what painting could and should do is unexpectedly sidelined. In the 'anything goes' of new German painting, which is flexing its muscles on all fronts, serious arguments that distinguish clearly between ingratiation and 'deliberate affirmation', between 'stylistic breaks' and dilettantism, between colour blindness and 'consciously undermining conventions of painting', are increasingly rare and difficult to make.

All this, however, is amply provided for by Sven Drühl's paintings. In a surprising twist, the confusion of 'anything goes' is confronted with a pictorial concept that ties the various ends of the convoluted discourse surrounding painting persuasively and neatly together. Without getting lost in the pathos of asserting the act of painting, without resorting to the ecstasy of genius or far-fetched exertions as regards contents, his pictures withstand the nuanced multiplicity, the cut and thrust of ambitious debate. He spins painting's wheel with a playful lightness of touch and, in all seriousness, devises an outlandish but persuasive pasticcio amounting to a private history of styles. It is perhaps a considerable advantage in so doing that Drühl is firmly convinced he is "no painter" and postulates a conceptual approach that "reinterprets painting whilst avoiding it." (ii) Perhaps not – whatever, as might be expected, his paintings look very different.

What lies behind this professional verbal camouflage is, first and foremost, surprisingly painterly and, secondly, overtly rooted in tradition. Landscape painting - in full regalia, so to speak. Drühl, whilst vehemently distrustful of painting and insisting he can not paint at all, (iii) has been unscrupulously copying his way through the history of painting for three years. He indulges his personal preferences for both the famous and the unknown: Kirchner and Koch, Derain and Schishckin, Munch and Friedrich, Still and Havekost. The works are dismembered and recomposed. Entirely devoid of people, the disparate elements are strung together to form a composite landscape tableau that continually reveals new multistable figures and sleights of hand.

Right from the outset, Drühl tackled his great role models with brute force. The contour drawing of the picture is laid down using silicon straight from the tube – a gelatinous, crude sketch, a more or less exact copy of the original, which does away with the symbolism, Romanticism and metaphysics of the source material. Hodler's

mountains, Koch's forests, Friedrich's ice floes or an elegantly curved tree by Derain appear as undemanding as 'painting by numbers'. The complexity of the original is simplified, its size standardized, the image cropped to emphasize the importance of the picture plane. Already at the picture's extremely rudimentary conception, the boundaries between kitsch and art, banality and aesthetics are blurred. It is no accident that Drühl's quickly applied silicon lines recall the lead contours of medieval enamels or stained glass, just as they do the cloisonné of the Nabis or Hodler's or Gauguin's hard, graphic delineation.

Whereas former groups of works, in which he copied oriental carpet patterns or TV test pictures, represented a determined rejection of an inspired pictorial genesis in the artist's studio and the imperative of originality, the act of copying is now charged in a variety of ways. It is only marginally concerned with distancing itself from the increasingly implausible 'invention' of motifs worthy of painting. Neither is the fact that the artist deliberately selects heroes from his private history of painting, whose graphic qualities lend themselves to his cloisonné aesthetic solely responsible for investing the moment of copying with new valencies. The central concern is the consciously sought out aporia of a celebration of painting in the moment of its apparent avoidance, in which Drühl's brightly coloured, abundant pictures formulate their aesthetic credo.

The outline of the landscape coming straight from the tube, serves as a neutral background which struggles to limit painting's equivalent to the horror vacui. The areas carefully left blank are painted in with industrial lacquer and classic oil paint. In these lacquered areas, painted with the canvas lying flat, various shades of blue and white indicate sky, clouds and the flanks of glaciers or else yellows and greens blend to produce Swiss mountain pastures. Alongside the industrial lacquer, whose colours intersperse like watercolours or are isolated by the hardened silicon ridges, the oil paint seems to raise painterly questions as to the smoothness of the surface, the playful aleatoriness of the lacquer. Coniferous forests spring to life, water lilies bloom and towering ice floes are given slight nuances as a result of the finely worked impasto.

A close up of their surface reveals essential elements of Sven Drühl's paintings – when the illusory reality of the landscape gives way to the abstraction of the carefully scrutinized details. This amalgam of monochrome areas and sluggish colour runs and of its painterliness as heralded by the brushstrokes and industrially sealed off colour, is both a sober, level-headed reflection and a heated discourse on painting. By juxtaposing copy and recreation of an original source, Drühl develops a complex system of analytic reflection and unabashed self-indulgence. Despite his claim that he has no wish to be a painter he makes rather skilful use of all the instruments at painting's disposal. The painted picture is reaffirmed by the constant "this on top of that" of the gestures and media, of his painting instruments and tubes, without getting bogged down in abysmally superficial soul-searching.

So it would appear that this 'not being able to paint', this desire for a shabbily painted picture, the attempt to create distance, invariably results in an unexpectedly striking and, above all, beautiful painting. The affinity established by Helga Meister between Drühl's 'painting by numbers' and the ironic, snotty but always ultimately seductive experiments that Martin Kippenberger conducted on himself, seems entirely pertinent

(iv) . It is less about being an expert and more about a discourse on expertise ending with the maximum mediation becoming direct, plausible painting.

By restricting his repertoire to a few constantly reoccurring names and motifs, this pleasurable analysis between picture and reality is both surprising and persuasive. The resulting back and forth of the serially structured inventory of pictures turns the copyist of his own history of painting into a manic agent provocateur. Starting out from his familiar, valued original, the latter examines the feasibility of his painterly field study between kitsch and masterpiece. A series of murals and works on paper developed since 2002 demonstrate this examination of painting and its history in a specific way – not only is the painterly structure broken down into close-ups that continually turn in on one another, but the picture motifs are brought together from the most disparate sources.

Behind such enigmatically abbreviated titles as “C.D.F.J.A.K.F.H” we find Messieurs Friedrich, Koch and Hodler. They each contribute an emblematic motif that is integrated, in different combinations with Messieurs Schischkin, Blechen and Kürten, into a new art historical rebus during the next field test. As a result the same flowers, originally painted by Hodler, run through the Herne works. Furthermore, the diverse landscape samples result in shifting formulations of fragmentary openness and condensed compositions, whose density is evenly spread across surface and space.

In as far as these composite collages demonstrate the fragmentary nature of every world view – including the painter’s – the Drühlian horror vacui seems to find comfort in colour and texture. The white ground or lightly tinted canvas next to the few areas of colour gains in importance. Colourful samples are used more sparingly to give the adjacent abstract expanse sufficient space. Now the conceptual aspect of his pictorial concept comes into its own as the promise of the world that the picture should create or confirm, increasingly resembles an unfinished puzzle which is forever rearranging itself. Painting and the history of painting become a fund of unlimited and unlimitable metaphorical worlds. Possibly Sven Drühl uses them in much the same playful and aleatory way as George Perec describes his work on his principal novel quoted at the beginning of this text: “My ambition as an author is to (...) realize a writing project in which I never write the same book twice, or better still, in which despite writing the same book each time, I still throw a new light on it every time.” (v)

- (i) George Perec. *Das Leben Gebrauchsanweisung (Life: a User's Manual)*, Frankfurt 2002⁵, p.14, (translated by C.M.)
- (ii) *Michael Krajewski in conversation with Sven Drühl: "Am liebsten hätte ich jemanden bezahlt, mir das abzunehmen"*, in: *Sven Drühl: "Die Aufregung"*, Leverkusen, 2002, p. 36f
- (iii) Ibid. p. 35
- (iv) Helga Meister: *Sven Drühl: "Die Aufregung"*, in: *Kunstforum International Volume 159, April-May, Ruppichterorth 2002*. p. 370
- (v) George Perec, on *Das Leben Gebrauchsanweisung (Life: a User's Manual)*, quoted in Eugen Helmlé: *Marginalien zu George Perec*, in appendix to *Das Leben Gebrauchsanweisung*, Frankfurt 2002⁵, p. 22f, (translated by C.M.)