

From: Silvia Gertsch, Xerxes Ach: Sinnesreize hrsg. Kunstmuseum Bern und Kathleen Bühler, 2015 (P. 235 – 238)**Interview with the artist Xerxes Ach****«Silvia Gertsch, Xerxes Ach: Sinnesreize », 23.10.2015 – 21.02.2016**

In my younger years I experimented with everything possible, tried out different things. Then things turned more towards monochromy, and I started painting with oil paints on gessoed paper.

What effect do you achieve with that?

Beautiful matte colors. You mix up a paste in a glass bowl with rabbit-skin glue, champagne chalk, and titanium white and spread it very finely. That produces a beautiful surface and functions like a blind mirror. When I met Silvia Gertsch, I was just making chalk bases with the intention of painting on them later. They are still there in my storage space. As time went on, the technique became too time-consuming. For the fellowship exhibition in Zurich (Werk- und Atelierstipendien der Stadt Zürich, Helmhaus, 1991) I painted them monochrome and with that, won the residency at the studio in Genoa (1992). There, I started to yearn for a faster technique, because things were moving too slowly for me. So I began working with varnish on packing paper. I stretched several thick layers of the paper on a stretcher frame and applied multiple coats of pigmented varnish onto the paper.

How many coats of varnish were there?

There were between five and ten layers of gloss varnish. Bernhard Bürgi then organized the Von Nah (1995) exhibition at the Kunsthalle Zürich, where I hung an entire wall with fifteen works. In the 1990s, I also had a phase during which I used oil and wax to paint previously gathered colors on A4 paper, and in this way collected colors (Teile 1–33, p. 218). Actually, it's an open system. Harm Lux arranged them into a particular order for the exhibition Salon (Shedhalle Zürich, 1990), and they have remained that way until today. He has a good sense for colors. For me, that was the start of my "valid" work. A painterly composition that is not within a picture, but rather, by virtue of the individual parts.

How did the break occur between the works from the 1980s and the monochrome works of the following decade?

In the 1980s I was in Berlin. Salomé, Fetting and Middendorf were the heroes. I also painted very expressively. But for me, it wasn't so "valid." Instead, I was just going with the crowd. Later in Zurich, I encountered other kinds of art. Initially it was the constructive concrete painters who inspired me, although my works are more sensory. Then I saw an exhibition with monochrome aluminum panels by Adrian Schiess and monochrome works by Thomas Stalder (Ausstellungsraum Bildraum, Zurich). Extremely important, however, was Blinky Palermo, to whom Bernhard Bürgi dedicated an exhibition at the Kunstmuseum Winterthur. What I saw there inspired me more than the Zurich concrete artists.

From composing with several paintings you then moved quickly into space. Was that planned?

That was a coincidence. For my submission to the Eidgenössisches Stipendium I prepared varnish works (Teile, 1995, p. 61), which were then honored and exhibited at the Kunsthaus Glarus (1995). I had actually wanted to hang these four large-format panels on the wall. One was already hanging, and the other three were still standing slanted against the wall. We instantly realized that the slanted ones reflected a lot more light so we left them leaning against the wall. You get a better reflection of yourself in them when they are leaning against a wall, and you can submerge in them. The painting thus became an object.

For you, a painting is therefore not a window to the world but primarily an object?

The material substance has always been important to me. After my packing-paper phase, I began working with paint directly on aluminum. Packing paper, too, had become too fragile for me.

Why did you mix the colors yourself?

Varnish and industrially manufactured paints contain so many solvents that, over time, they began to affect my health. Since I was processing large amounts of varnish, it became too much. Added to that, I couldn't air the room, because dust fibers might have possibly drifted onto the mirror-smooth painting surfaces. I wasn't even aware of the smell anymore, but for visitors the fumes in my studio were a problem. Also with the work with oil paints, for which I needed endless amounts of turpentine, the situation was no better. To apply polyurethane varnish onto aluminum, the problem is that the aluminum has to be entirely free of grease for the varnish to stick. The panels have to be degreased with acetone—and of course without a protective mask back then. When you're young, you don't think about your health, and you do foolish things. I suffered from a cough frequently, and I realized that there was no future for me with these materials. In my search for alternatives, I came across traditional methods, such as egg tempera. Of course it is quite demanding and elaborate to mix egg tempera, but because the materiality of the paints is important to me, it was worthwhile for that reason alone. After a lot of experimenting I developed my own recipe, around 1990, after the exhibition at Kunsthalle Wintherthur. The egg is the emulsifier and makes it possible to mix oil and pigments without any solvents. But you need a lot of yolks for each painting. When the picture is freshly painted, you can even still smell them. To start with, I used it to create the Painting series (2000–2008, pp. 63–72), which reveal a fine frame or background painting on the edges of the image. In principle, all works have a base painted in complementary contrasts. But with the early varnish works, you can only see it from the side. Over time, I let the lower layers become visible on the edges. That later led to the three-color Paintings (pp. 70–71) with the broad frames.

They remind me quite strongly of abstract icons, because they frame something radiant with the stripes within the painting.

This effect is a desired one, as I am concerned with transcendence. It materializes when countless transparent layers of paint unfold their magical effect. I often begin with very strong colors and paint over them again and again. In each case, the lightest color always comes at the end. Sometimes I am nearly desperate if I can't get a certain hue. When you produce the colors yourself, each color has different qualities. Every pigment behaves differently. That distinguishes them from the industrially manufactured ones.

How do you determine the color combinations? Do you sketch beforehand, or do you simply start painting spontaneously?

I determine them conceptually. As a starting point, I use depictions of colors in books, magazines, newspapers, or my own written notes describing powerful color experiences. These define the leeway of the creative decisions. My concern is the color composition. Where the inspiration has come from doesn't play any role. It could be fashion photos, travel shots, textile samples, or sports illustrations. There's no hierarchy; the range extends from the most trivial things to art books. I'm a visual person and take the inspiration wherever I can get it. You take something that triggers a reaction and might yield an interesting painting. But in the end, I paint parts of my soul, my images of desire, my visions, and in so doing, don't think of a different beholder. That's why the starting point—the model that inspires me in terms of color—is entirely irrelevant. They are my paintings,

they come from my interior, and they are a piece of me. I paint the pictures that I, myself, would like to see.

How do you always reach this balance that sets in in your compositions, which describes a balance of powers rather than a standstill?

That has to do with the complementary relationship of the colors and the fact that the light and color come from the darkness. In this way, they begin to float, such as in *Cosmic Light* (2013–2015, pp. 125–139). When you paint light in light, you get an entirely different effect. But the lightest color as final layer is the pure light that illuminates from the darkness and floats in the space. It's about materialized colored light, so to speak. Most difficult in this are the transitions, which are painted extremely thinly as glazes. My entire oeuvre, which is in constant transformation, has red lines running through it. Remaining the same are the numerous layers that make it possible to submerge in my paintings. The beholder can step into a color space. For this reason, certain titles have spatial associations: *Colorscapes* (1996–1999, pp. 49–60, 62), for example—a colorful landscape, like in a dream or a film. They are painted so that the background is developed in a complimentary way, and towards the top have less and less pigment, but, in return, more varnish. In this way, they are opaque and appear unfathomably deep. They hang there before the wall and seem to be floating.

The change from the varnished, shining surfaces to matte, velvety color surfaces is also fascinating. That occurred when I reversed my working method. Whereas in the *Colorscapes* it was the topmost layers that had little pigment and a lot of varnish, in *Cosmic Light* and *Paintings*, the topmost layer has a lot of pigment and little binding material. My concern is the appearance of painting, its sensuality: either varnished, closed, and cool; or permeable, cloudy, and velvety. Following the icon-like works, movement came back into the paintings with *Cosmic Light* and the most recent works (pp. 134–137). After also using watercolors for a while, I wanted to paint pictures that make it possible to sense this lightness, but at the same time allow for chance. In the process, I finally broke away from the square format. That was a major liberation from the earlier concept.

Interview: Kathleen Bühler