

Z W I N G E R P A L M E R S P A U S E N

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Painting in Aspic

On the white pictures of Thorsten Zwinger

When viewing these paintings, it is best to switch off one's cognitive apparatus. They show nothing, they portray nothing, they reproduce nothing, they depict nothing. They don't call on any of the things in our genetic makeup that help us understand pictures. If we look for something, we find nothing, because we are looking for it. No references to the past, no statements on the pitched battles of modernism, nor on the absence of such battles in the art of the present. No themes, no stories, no allegories. Even the titles are phonetically motivated parallels to the pictures' refusal to say anything, with no link to their content. The paintings are declarations of a selfless existence – no single aspect, no partial solution, no intuition helps to render them legible.

Precisely as emanations of radical self-referentiality, however, they have the potential to transcend themselves, in terms of both materiality and scale. All of these pictures function as miniatures – but also as large, wall-filling panels. They consist of soft paint matter and as such they have surfaces – but they have no skin, nothing that closes or protects them, no fine varnish as a last fluid coat over delicate brushwork. The picture support must hold the corpus of a congealed mass. It is evenly spread, scarred with deep fissures and ravine-like cracks formed during the drying process. The upheavals of the material write their own messages, but they don't communicate with the painted structures that accommodate them. They pervade one another and shine through ominously like veins in flesh. The connection between surface, depth and painterly structure is created solely by this corpus, as its only motif. Its emergence from a once sticky substance, its artificial gloss, the transparency of the mixed paint color, all of this creates a material pictorial space of the greatest indeterminacy. Just as Gottfried Benn looked in people not for their figure, outline or social gestalt, but for the substance of their instinct-driven formlessness – an accretion of calories – Zwinger sees painting not as illustration, not as

something that adheres to reality, but as emotionally driven existence without form – an accretion of paint. The intellectual figure of the medium, the painting, ends as a slab of pigmented resin.

A radical act of negation with the disturbing quality of a blank rebuttal. For those who associate painting with the notion that it conveys something that existed to be seen, or that it should lay claim to anything existing at all, Zwinger's pictures probably embody the horror of the void, vessels for emptiness, turning away glassily into a non-semiotic idiom. But for those who have long since given up wishing to find in painting something in any way related to observable realities, the pictures offer a miraculous relief. They are disillusioning like a revelation that befalls one without asking one's opinion. The exclusion of memory and a concept of existence clears the path for unspoiled feeling.

Achieving this, by excluding all forms of intellectual referentiality, is a fundamental aspect of modernism. Caspar David Friedrich tackled this eradication of expectations, never visiting his landscapes but making them up. He was not interested in any specific piece of countryside. He needed a facade for the spiritual dimension of light to shine through, the lucidity of a world behind the world, the grounds of creation that elude perception. It was an attempt to free painting from its function as a mirror of reality. Painting was no longer to be a vehicle for illustrating the world, instead becoming pure art, a path to form that follows the consequences of its internal arrangements as soon as the first point calls for the second. The ideal picture then functions only in the hermetic logic of its own self-regulation. The non-figurative painting of classical modernism recapitulated all of the efforts already made by romanticism and the late 19th century to turn the object of the picture into the picture as object. One difficulty remained in the anthropological constant of our associative tendency which, when faced with abstract signs, nevertheless always tries to identify them as representations of some specific visual phenomenon (seeing a cross as a human being with outstretched arms, for example) so that the viewer constantly fills out a picture with findings or supposed meanings. Today, however, in the age of post-post-unmodernity, where reading signets, logos and initials has long since become everyday graphical routine, this will to arrive at pure form has lost its self-evidence. It seems as if everything has already existed – been thought or explained or rumored. Pure form is an idea of innocence that has gone cold over a period of 200 years; after two world wars and in an age of virtual media worlds, it is an idea no one believes in anymore anyway. When everything becomes a picture, pictures lose their meaning. Painting is then the continuation of a historical praxis in the nirvana of its ongoing appreciation. And this is especially true of contemporary painting.

Gerhard Richter found an ingenious response to this: between painterly reproduction of blurred reproductions, requiring fine brushes for its photographic look, and the abstract-painterly scraping of paint masses, that no longer needs a brush at all, he nipped previous definitions of painting in the bud. Specific likeness, abstract formation – whatever. A picture is an event of aesthetic object formation. Here, painting is no more than what it is – a decision to believe oneself this way or that. Those who understand this get away with it. They leave behind the conventional requirements, the ideologies and the criteria that lie outside the picture itself. Exhibitions are then arrangements that prove nothing. This is why, in today's museums for contemporary

art, the neorealist genre paintings of Neo Rauch hang as a fantastic afterglow of history alongside the conceptual scriptures of young people who are no longer even aware of what they owe to the Informel or Fluxus art of 60 years ago – it no longer matters.

In such a situation of total dissolution there are, as always, only two options: either you swim downstream with the others, or you stand on the riverbank. For as long as I have known him, Zwinger has been in the latter category – an ornery doubter. As an artist, he, too, admires the greats. But he doesn't know how he might join their number. Whatever he does resembles the efforts of a sincere but secondary devotion. So he has preferred to pause for thought. Even worse, for him, than being a bad painter would be to become an epigone.

Which is why, in recent years, Zwinger has cleared everything out of his visual world that might recall great art. He is so aware of the unseemly one-upmanship of the connoisseur that he even goes against things which come easily to him – such as his eminent gift for harmonious color schemes. He does not wish to break with conventions, as the cliché of the consummate artist requires. It annoys him as an artist to be expected to act the kind of antiquated flaneur who sees what others do not see, not to mention the type of the itinerant genius who upgrades all manner of trash into original art. He is nothing of the sort. Zwinger has a large, brightly lit studio. And that's where things get serious.

Luxury is not the most important thing in the world, but it is the most demanding. This being the case, all that remains for the painter is to reject as a whole the entire range of individual requirements (concerning knowledge, taste, history, strategy). Delicate watercolors, landscapes with coasts and skies, portraits and autumn leaves with colorful structures that become pleasingly abstract, small or large, famous or not – all of this is no longer an issue. Not content, not style, but the art form itself must become the focus – not the act of painting, but painting as a whole.

There are examples of this search for finality, radical departures that try to leave behind everything that had been produced before without simply abandoning what had been possible. This only works if one takes what is known but no longer wanted and puts it into a new order. Claude Monet did this with his waterlily pictures. When everything seemed to be over – Impressionism, Expressionism, Cubism – this painter turned away from cathedrals exploding in the glare of the sun, focusing his attention on his darkening garden pond. As painting, this pond is stretched into the endless ribbon of an unrolling picture of the world. He turned what was close at hand into everything. At the Musée de l'Orangerie the details that can be seen close up on this strip 2 meters tall and 17 meters wide break down into millions of spots of colour. These spots are all one can know about the water lilies. Picture by picture, the water lily series adds up to more than 100 meters of painting – the immeasurable as an act of self-nullification. The order of the "picture" with format and frame becomes the order of a processual sequence for which any format becomes a deliberate intervention, an arresting of progress, an interruption of movement.

When the American Expressionists saw this installation, in the early 1950s, it confirmed their belief that the painting of European Modernism had come to an end. This promise strengthened their own striving for direct self-expression and its precondition – the non-referentiality of a radically subjective approach that rejected any intellectual content that went beyond the hermeticism of making. The next

painter of light who attempted to realize this concept in absolute terms was Mark Rothko. In his work too, the unit of the individual picture is dissolved into a greater whole. It is no longer a monumental essence as in Monet, however, but the very basis of the work. At the end of the 1950s, Rothko began painting his Seagram Murals series, 16 paintings that are now grouped in separate rooms at three different museums around the world. But their image would only be fulfilled in the whole series, just as everything Rothko painted between 1950 and 1970 is in fact one single picture, faceted by production. The Seagram Murals were the point of departure, the aim was to create "a permanent, exclusive room" as Rothko put it. Whereas Monet's Water Lilies were a final gloaming, a farewell, the transition from a belief in the seen to a belief in seeing, Rothko had already switched to making the picture itself an aggregate of light. In Monet's work, the surface becomes a metaphysical abstraction of the concrete that is infinitely extendable. Rothko dissolves the up-front quality of the specific into something behind – something that shines out in the paintings from a space without depth. Color becomes pure and spiritual in Goethe's sense. In both cases, an individual statement is abandoned in favor of a sphere of definition.

And this is exactly where Zwinger, the doubter, picks up the story. In endlessly fine nuances, his white pictures give brilliant series of representations whose expanse unsettles the load-bearing structure of the room as depth and depth merge. In spite of this, unlike his predecessors Zwinger is not interested in either metaphysics or transcendence. These parameters, too, are abandoned. Instead, he constructs his pictures as if he wanted to embalm the discarded art form itself: no atomized likeness as in Monet; no purity detached from any object as in Rothko's color field painting; he no longer even uses conventional oil paints. Instead, a display of solidified chemicals in the high shine of industrial gloss paint. The beautiful as pain, the ugly as the body of pain: fine greyscales, honey-color ground, sunny field of stripes in the fine opacity of a milky jelly. This is painting in aspic. Each picture celebrates the corpse, but without wanting to bury it.

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