

„The Painting itself has passed through the Filter of Memory“

Mario Kramer in conversation with Sabine Brand Scheffel.

When we both started studying in the late 1970s you at the Art Academy and me at the University of Freiburg, didn't we actually live in quite an ivory tower? How do you remember your time at the academy in retrospect? Was it really freedom we had?

Absolutely. Considering space, the Freiburg Academy building was a veritable idyll with a large garden in the heart of the city. Our class of about 22 students shared the traditional house called the "fox's burrow". "Es wurd' gmolt" ("painted") as it was called in the Southern Baden dialect: every student had an easel and studio space and dedicated himself or herself to the, at the time, renewed painting with a literal "hunger for images".

Our class loved to travel. We regularly went to exhibitions, museums, collections in Germany, the near Switzerland and to other European countries. Often, international artists came to the house, like Wolfgang Laib, who cooked a dinner of rice, various ingredients and genuine silver and gold with us or Michael Buthe, whose work we first met on the documenta7. We also visited studios of colleagues like the one of Anselm Kiefer in the Odenwald.

In this respect I was able to use the unspoiled state and remoteness of the place as a source for concentration as well as a field for personal issues. I deeply appreciated this freedom.

How do you perceive art? Are there any works of art that have always and persistently drawn your personal interest?

The great colourist Jean Siméon Chardin, with his hazy, atmospheric still lifes, Grünewald's passionate colour harmony and theatrical stage sets, Vermeer's and Pieter de Hooch's intimate and narrative "space-light-art", just like the still lifes of Giorgio Morandi, whose objects never change into abstract forms but remain objects. My enthusiasm for Matisse and Pollock, as well as for the intense photographic productions of, for example Gregory Crewdson, reflect my affinity for the Romantics as well as for abstract artists.

Do you think the strong coloristic vitality of your work is a rather modernist aspect of your visual aesthetics? Is it in some ways more pure than the one of the old masters?

My colours are mostly based on watercolour hue records collected like travelling notes in a kind of exercise book. The colour mixing is done right on the spot. There are colours and constellations that are particularly striking and that touch me. It is the place with its light or darkness, which evokes certain colours.

These trip miniatures serve as the basis for further work in the studio, often as a starting point for an image. For example, in the painting "comares" (p. 23) the loud pink is combined with a bright orange into a vivid colour puddle and the dull grey-turquoise is repressed to the background, which is then rather forced to come back to surface by the deep black of the ink. Mysterious ambient light is created that reveals a suspicion of the hidden by positioning many, mostly transparent layers of paint on top of each other.

How emotional or rational is your approach in your painting process? Is there calculated coincidence?

I am looking for the "inner sound", harmonious compositions that are intuitively obvious during the painting process.

Emotional states and moods can indeed be captured in words such as joy, sadness, despair and so on, but these terms insufficiently describe individual perception or expression of an emotion. So I chose painting and drawing.

The idea of the image, the imagination, the memory of what has been experienced and processed is there and is transformed into matter. Alongside the painting process I do small material tests on paper and wood, painted by products which are incidentally created but may suddenly be elevated into the next medium, that is onto canvas. These material tests are also there to get into the mood to work on a larger canvas, but never its preparation, – well only very rarely. The battle only begins on the large surfaces. Calculated coincidence sometimes becomes a companion.

Is photography also a starting point for your painting? And if so, what kind of quality should a template have?

To this day I have never used photography as a template for my painting, it rather serves to keep my memory alive of things I have seen. A starting point for my painting is possibly what is called the photographic look, or what movie camera people call the Kadraze², a term that describes the selection of the frame. I do not photograph a lot, but the things that strike me are recorded digitally. Carrying a big camera around is too cumbersome for me, so I use my mobile phone, which now provides good quality pictures. Titles of my work often refer to places where a photo was taken. The painting itself has gone through the filter of memory.

Asking quite generally, what stimulates your visual thinking? What touches you?

The world is going through the eye. The occasion could be a discovery in nature, a special moment in my perception of direct experience, a meeting by chance of two things that make me see links between them. These incidents I save in thought and memory. Later in the studio – it can take days or weeks – it appears in a picture again, this transformation is the essence for me.

Often its colours or colour harmonies in spatial situations that make me see a connection. An example would be a palm frond in front of a glossy curved greenish architectural facade. The horizon line does not matter, and the item is photographed without thinking of the content of the entire image. The palm frond is as important as the green of the wall behind it, which unrestrainedly pushes forward. The space between and behind things is what I am interested in. This deeply felt impression is what I'm trying to translate into my imagery.

Do countries and your journeys have an impact on your painting?

Yes. Our trips aim at mostly original, unspoiled, archaic landscapes, but also the encounter with unfamiliar places, with foreign cultures, smells, places and spaces enrich my world. Travelling also always means being open for the foreign, having a dialogue with cultures, exploring the world, which is very important for the creative process.

It is therefore more essential for you that you come across other things in your work, and it has never been the case that you were determined by philosophies which you implemented into a painting?

My artistic approach revolves around the continuous connection between imagination and reality, repetition, memory and transcendence. These are concepts that have already been covered in Romanticism, in the natural philosophical writings of Schelling and Novalis on natural process and mental process. Accordingly, only the artist expresses the constant tension in his or her figurative language, "which does not solve the mystery, but metaphorically describes and gives an idea." I even dealt with Kierkegaard's writing about the repetition once "... because repetition is the ultimate expression of what was memory for the Greek. Repetition and recollection are the same movement, only in opposite directions. As what is remembered, has been, is backwardly repeated, whereas the actual repetition reminds one forwardly".³ I was also impressed by Buddhist teachings on my trips to Southeast Asia, including Burma. However, I cannot claim that I am able to convert philosophy into painting. I am rather looking for my own recognition.

To me, natural phenomena very often seem to be a starting point for your painting. But more and more one can find a very high level of abstraction in it. How does this dependent on each other?

Nature as a source of inspiration is the search of the origin, of the essence, of the substance, of the "natural beauty", but also the search of silence. The abstraction of the objective is accompanied by a search for the essential, finding a kind of common validity of the subject. The resulting structure of my painting is formed independently of the subject, but on the other hand, it is precisely this structure, that takes the shape of real conditions.

Therefore, you seem to have a very immediate relationship to nature.

Yes, you may say so. Nature as discovery-, research- but also space for retreat.

Colour and transparency play a big role in your work in my opinion. How does the act of painting begin?

The act of painting begins with creating a picturesque atmosphere on a canvas or on a wood base. Usually the canvases are primed in white, which is important to lay many transparent layers of colour on top of each other and to reflect light. A three-dimensional atmosphere is created. Images in turn may disappear under opaque layers of colour or black ink surfaces and reversely appear again later by further processing the subject. Partially colour areas open a view through filigree openings, which one can only imagine. Both, the areas of colour as well as the lines on the painting's surface force the viewer not only to investigate the visible but also the "no longer fully available" and what is hidden under several layers of paint. The gap between what is there and what has been removed, motivate the eye and mind of the viewer, to be aware of the image as a process of layering.

It is a slow, insistent, meditative process that takes a long time to complete. It is a disciplined fight, the search for the sensual value of matter.

Would you say that it is your intention not to pigeonhole a certain colour, but to keep as much context and association open as possible?

3 Sören Kierkegaard, Die Wiederholung. Die Krise. Frankfurt a. M., 1984, p. 7

Correct. The viewer is guided through colour, its context, on the track of the narrative in the field of mystery, by looking for features for his or her own orientation in the according pictures.

Have you never been interested in monochrome painting, because in your opinion one colour alone may not be that meaningful?

Well, of course, the construction of an image in one single colour or in divergent low pitches quite interests me; such pictures already exist, but currently only work in combination with "partner images". I do not know whether light and colour might become my sole topic.

Is there a narrative moment?

Asking questions about the behind and to respond simultaneously. You see something and know that there is more to discover. The puzzle, the difference between what one can see, what one can recognize and what must remain idea or assumption. My works are attempts to give me a piece of clarity about this.

In your work you can observe a fluctuation again and again. You break open frozen situations. You change between figuration and abstraction, between various forms of painting, between inside and outside.

My image archive, both the spiritual as well as the concrete, link present and history, individual and cultural memory. The memory filters the reservoir and the staging of the scene on the canvas lead to additional design elements, lyrical abstractions and their links.

The fluctuation, as you call it, the openness and versatility of my work has to do with the perception of the fractures in our lives. It reflects feelings again.

Painting steadily means struggling between the old and the new, between views and experience, between love and death.... if you like it.

What is your specific worldview? In how far are you religious and in what sense?

My work is first and foremost a question to myself. What I am interested in is who I am, what moves me? Perhaps the following quote from a Japanese Zen master offers a chance for approximation: "... See directly, hear quite directly, but be like a mirror there. Simply reflect what you experienced, what you find in front of you and do not judge it dualistically. So your mind will never be able to find peace. In every moment be like a mirror without looking, whether it's good or bad."

What vision do you have about the existence in this world; suddenly standing in this world, live a distance and then quit again? Is there any attempt to overcome this temporality in the work?

My work symbolizes my ideas of this world. If all goes well, people looking at my art are encouraged to see more consciously and to perceive their own surroundings with different eyes. My work will outlive me and bear witness to my belief that images are projections of emotions. They symbolize ideas and feelings and show an idea of my seen and imagined world.

What is the reason, what are the occasions in which you start to work? Is it lust, is it forced, is it an urge to create something special such as an important image for such an exhibition?

Painting is a wonderful activity that generates great satisfaction, grants freedom and happiness.

Does music play a role in your studio?

Little. I sometimes listen to serials on the radio, at the moment this is Anna Karenina by Tolstoy on SWR2, music plays a role only in the "not-painting-times".

My studio is located on a major road in the centre of Karlsruhe, the south-facing windows are hung with bright fabric and diffused daylight fills the room with even light. The incessant traffic noise eventually becomes a noise. If I'm in the studio for a while a kind of silence is created in the room and within myself. I need this confined location, the studio, to come to terms with me and the world. I'm in the middle of the city and yet the retreat works for some time.

What kind of museums are your favourite museums?

Museums, which have a rather bizarre-looking touch by their presentation or their selection of their exhibits, such as the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford, or Fürstenberg Museum in Donaueschingen stocked with valuables. A special place, which has almost become my own living room, is the Kunsthalle Karlsruhe with its fabulous collection of German, French and Dutch art.

What would you have become if you had not become a painter?

Well, I have never seriously thought about that, maybe a mathematician, or an architect or a natural scientist ...

This is interesting! And I wanted to be a predator trainer. Thank you very much for our conversation.

1 Dr. Mario Kramer is head curator at the MMK Museum für Moderne Kunst Frankfurt am Main.

The interview was conducted in February 2014 via email.

2 The Kadraage (framing) focuses on the optical image and does not necessarily reflect the natural view: through use of space, light setting, choice of lens and other influential means distorted proportions or visual detail accents may be achieved (wikipedia).