

Listening to the Light

Robert Leprohon, Marc Adrian, Karl Hikade, Edgar Knopp, Leo Zogmayer
zs art gallery, 5.11. - 12.11.2018

by Günther Oberhollenzer

The exhibition *Listening to the Light* celebrates the work of the Canadian artist Robert Leprohon, whose wonderful paintings are on show for the first time, not only for the first time in Austria, but for the first time ever. And we celebrate four other artists - Marc Adrian, Karl Hikade, Edgar Knopp, Leo Zogmayer - whose work engages with Leprohon's oeuvre in an exciting and inspiring manner. The work of these artists from Austria also helps us to get a better sense of the paintings of our Canadian guest, as there are some commonalities and affinities.

Robert Leprohon is 92 years old and has been painting for more than seventy years. Leprohon started out as an advertising illustrator and later became head of public relations at Les Presses de l'Université Laval. He pursued his creative passion in his spare time, mostly in the evening. Having retired many years ago, the artist is still working in his studio every day. Painting has always been a vital necessity to him, but he has shunned the art market throughout his life and never exhibited his work (except for one group exhibition at the Museum of Fine Arts in Montreal in 1947). Even so, Leprohon always kept abreast of the great art movements of his time, he had artist friends, and for two decades he was married to the expressionist painter Gisèle Leclerc. He maintained close contact with the artist group Les Automatistes, which was founded in Quebec in the 1940s and had its roots in Surrealism and the surrealist notion of automatism. Les Automatistes were looking for intuitive, lyrical abstraction with an unmistakably Canadian flavour. Even closer to his artistic heart were Les Plasticiens, a non-figurative movement that emerged in Quebec in the 1950s. In response to Les Automatistes, they were striving for a more rigorously structured type of abstraction. It was based on their belief that the formal level of painting as such (line, surface, contrasts, colour and texture) was at least as dramatic and emotional as surrealist automatism - a minimalist approach which Leprohon also endorses. Without any doubt, it is the light which is at the centre of his oeuvre, and in his paintings the artist tries to capture it with strong colours. "I am listening to the light, to the silence", says Leprohon. He develops his own "light code"; the colours are transformed to a personal alphabet, interwoven in clear geometric patterns, structures and forms.

The fascination for light has long existed in the arts, Orphism being a case in point. The French-Italian poet and art critic Guillaume Apollinaire coined the term "Orphic Cubism" at the beginning of the 20th century. He defined orphic cubists as artists capable of "painting new structures out of elements which have not been borrowed from the visual sphere, but have been created entirely by the artist himself. The works of the Orphic artist must simultaneously give a pure aesthetic pleasure, a structure which is self-evident, and a sublime meaning, that is, the subject".¹ This new tendency no longer wants to represent a beauty related to human enjoyment of nature. "The new artists demand an ideal beauty, which will be, not merely the proud expression of the species, but the expression of the universe, in so far as it has been humanized by light."² Reading these lines one might think Apollinaire writes directly about the work of Robert Leprohon.

¹ Guillaume Apollinaire, quoted from: Nina Schallenberg (ed) *Stimmen des Lichts – Delaunay, Apollinaire und der Orphismus*, Ausstellungskatalog Wilhelm-Mack-Museum, Ludwigshafen, Hirmer Verlag, Munich 2018, p. 9. English translation taken from: <http://theoria.art-zoo.com/from-the-cubist-painters-chapter-vii-guillaume-apollinaire/>

² Ibid.

Turning his back on an art concept based on a figurative representation of external reality led Leprohon to subscribe to the autonomy of colour and form. While rigorously composed in formal terms, his works are not soberly constructed. Throughout his life, the artist has been exploring the emotional potential of light and colour and translated it into a poetic and musical visual language. Many works have titles relating to music, and music serves as an inspiration to him. The paintings have a synesthetic character (a combination of two physically distinct areas of perception such as sound and colour). Leprohon paints music, vibrant and soulful, engaging and moving. But let's return to Orphism: Its aim was to juxtapose pure music and pure painting, which, divested from its representational aspect, was to represent a rhythmic harmony of colours. Colour and its spatial impact are essential elements of the composition. Light not only evokes colour, but light is colour in itself – the paintings of Leprohon are vivid testimony to that.

The work of Edgar Knoop fits superbly into an exhibition entitled Listening to the Light, as colour and light and the interaction of light source, viewer and substrate play a central role in this artist's work. Knoop moves between the poles of art, technology and science. He explores colour contrasts and develops systematically arranged colour sequences, taking into account their mimetic values and spatial effect. He conducts experiments in the field of holography and develops kinetic light collages as well as elaborate installations and fluorescent objects. Containing allusions to Op-Art, his works can surprise or irritate the viewers with effects such as movement or optical illusions that are the result of precise, abstract patterns and geometric colour figures. Knoop sees himself as a constructivist, someone who does not imitate reality, but wants to create a new reality. He wants to produce a world of images based on mathematical and scientific insights, which combines creative intellectual achievement with the pleasure of experimenting, and which challenges the viewers' perception and sense of colour.

Marc Adrian also takes a vivid interest in human perception processes and the dynamic communication between eyes and mind. As from the 1950s, his passion led him to create fascinating geometric reverse-glass montages kindred in spirit to Op-Art (on show here). It is difficult to do justice to Adrian's photographic, cinematic and literary work in just a few words; the artist is one of the pioneers of computer-generated texts, films and plays and, according to Peter Waibel, is also the "father of Austrian media art". He is an artist who always explores and crosses boundaries, his experimental and inter-media work straddling theory and practice, image and text montages, film and computer. Works of art are "the only models of reality we possess", Adrian said in 1967.

Narrow stripes and clear geometric surfaces, the colour application restrained and mostly monochrome. Many paintings are large formats that seem to float on the wall: it appears that Karl Hikade's captivating work also subscribes to the laws of minimalism, abstraction and constructivism. But Hikade has actually little truck with the notion of "abstraction", he favours "constructivism". Constructive, concrete art (in which we must also include Adrian) was a liberating blow after the Second World War. It rejects the figurative tendencies of Expressionism and endorses a notion of art based on lines, surfaces and colours and usually represents clear geometric principles. From an early point, Hikade has explored the concepts of Minimal Art. The collector Herbert Liaunig very aptly says the following about the artist: "For me, the image world of Karl Hikade was a new world. I grew up in the Vienna of abstract expressionism as represented by the St. Stephan group. Austrian painting has always been very baroque, expressive and colourful. Hikade came from England and had a completely different take on seeing. He was the one who introduced me to a more reduced type of art."

Leo Zogmayer, finally, is an extremely diverse and consistent artist. In his earlier years, his paintings, drawings and prints were narrative, gestural and expressive. But then his style underwent a radical change. He created three-dimensional and wall objects based on clear geometric basic forms (on show

in the exhibition). In the 1990s, he introduced further reductions. Individual words or short sentences are shown on monochrome coloured surfaces in reverse glass paintings or engraved in rectangular and cylindrical objects made of steel, aluminium and rubber, or sometimes placed in the public sphere in the form of large-format installations. Zogmayer opts for a conceptual and minimalistic approach to explore concepts relating to aesthetics and art; his pictorial (word) objects raise fundamental questions: does the frame of an image already represent an image in itself? What forms can art take? And what is the significance of beauty as a core notion of aesthetics?

I would venture to say that this exhibition is "beautiful". It presents artists of different generations and countries, their works very different and yet harmonious. It is an invitation to explore core themes relating to a geometric/abstract notion of art. And it is beautiful, inspiring and challenging, since it is the first opportunity to learn about the extraordinary work of Robert Leprohon.

English translation: Susanne Watzek