

Clara Kaufmann

multi-layered (multi-faced)

"I like contradictions" Wilhelm Drach mentions rather casually when I visit him in his studio in Mödling. A statement that should become for me the key sentence for the development (or in this case rather opening) of Drach's work. For gradually I noticed that Drach's predilection for the contradiction is reflected in his work in various ways like a red thread. But not as an end in itself and not necessarily on purpose.

Contradictions and contrasts run through all aspects of Drach's work: they are present in his working method as well as in each individual painting, but also in the overall view of the works. And the impression that the works leave on the recipient is probably also usually diametrically opposed to the actual history of their creation.

They are not striking, obvious contrasts, none that are obvious to the viewer. Drach's contradictions are hidden, subtle – you only see through them if you are informed about them. But noticing them, feeling them, one does them even without knowing about them. They form the basic tension, the tone of Drach's pictures. The energy oscillating between the opposites gives his paintings a vibrant liveliness.

After this theoretical introduction, I would now like to reveal some of the hidden contradictions in order to make my probably somewhat cryptic-sounding explanations more comprehensible.

Spontaneous / Planned

Open brushwork, intense colors, the sometimes pasty application of paint, spontaneously set strokes and lines, abstract appearance, gestural style. All these descriptions fit the visual appearance of Drach's oeuvre. His works look expressive, subjective, spontaneous, impulsive. They are all adjectives that are associated with certain movements in art history: Informel, Tachism, but also Neo-Expressionism and – especially in Austria – the "Neue Wilde" ("New Wild"). All these movements wanted to take the intellect by surprise with an eruptive, impulsive application of paint, to switch off thinking in order to create an "unleashed" art beyond concepts, academic traditions, and rationality. In the case of Informel and Tachism, another aim was to achieve a non-representationalism away from the very controlled geometric abstraction. In order to circumvent the traditional representational function of visual art, one used a painting style that followed physical impulses, which was spontaneous and sometimes "wild", in which unintentionality played a major role. Through the gestural moment, the unconscious of the artist or simply chance was to shape the paintings. The Neo-Expressionists and the "New Wild" pursued similar goals in the 1980s, whereby representationalism was again "allowed" here, although it was characterized by lush, strong colors, strong expressiveness, and a certain irrepressibility.

Looking at Drach's pictures, at first (and also second) glance one would easily place them in the tradition of the above-mentioned directions. The pictures give the impression of having been created quickly, spontaneous expressions, eruptions from the unconscious, which owe their tension to the immediacy of expression and the expressiveness of the artist. But far from it: Drach's pictures are neither quick nor spontaneous, and certainly not unconscious. His working method is slow, planned, thought-out. Before he touches the canvas with his brush, he already has an inner idea of what is to be created (an idea which, however, changes and constantly adapts during the process).

The first round of painting is followed by a phase of observation, analysis, reflection, and planning. These phases of reflection can be very extensive and last for days. Drach observes the painting he has begun, sits in front of it for hours, looks at it from close up and from a distance, dismantles it in his mind into individual parts, and then comes to a conclusion as to what should happen in the next step. Sometimes it is very little, at other times a lot. Paint and brushes are only used again after this detailed analysis – and despite all the planning, surprises often happen. Does what was good in front of the inner eye look

completely different in reality – sometimes even better than expected, sometimes worse. Or hand, brush, and paint do not work together as intended and something else comes out than what was planned. Every application of paint is like walking a tightrope: will the trick succeed, or will it lead to a crash?

Each new layer of color in the picture is followed by a new phase of reflection, a handling of the change, an adaptation of the ideas, the search for the next step. Most of Drach's paintings have gone through many of these layers, many analyses before he considers them finished. Sometimes it is only a two-centimeter line that completes the work at the end – but that is exactly what was necessary to put the picture in tension. And sometimes (not so rarely) the reflection on a picture never stops in the end. Even if Drach once found a work to be good and complete, that is no guarantee that it will remain so. "This painting has already been finished ten times", Wilhelm Drach mentions succinctly in a work he shows me in his studio. He does not shy away from reworking or repainting pictures that have already been exhibited (as completed, of course) or even published after months, years, or even decades. Drach is himself the strictest critic and he told me that he is tormented by every "bad" painting, that he no longer has access to, that he wants to rework. Only very rarely does a picture "happen" to him that he immediately knows is good and will remain good. Most of the time, however, these are lengthy processes that also require the painter to constantly deal with failure and how to deal with it.

Drach is, therefore, not concerned with creating "headless" pictures that owe their dynamics to unconscious, spontaneous gestures, but thinking and planning are a fundamental part of his artistic work. Expressed in numbers, one could estimate that in Drach's creative process, painting accounts for only 10% of his work and 90% for thinking, or in other words: for each layer of paint there are at least ten layers of thinking. Nevertheless, his visual language is a gestural one. Drach's painting style is/appears neither filigree nor careful, controlled, or geometrically exact. However, that would probably be more what one would expect when one knows about his working method. No, despite all deliberation, his ductus is a spontaneous, sometimes rough, large-scale, and expressive one. In the color scheme, the physical and the personality come into play. Even if Drach follows a plan, this plan can very well provide a dynamically set line or an expressively applied color surface. Drach's pictures are not created on the drawing table, he does not measure the course of a line or the outline of a colored surface with a ruler and compass. The imaginary form materializes through the use of the body on the canvas, and this body speaks its own language, which should not be denied. The hand and arm that guide the brush have and make their own line. The dynamic, gesturally expressive is Drach's personal, authentic signature, which he does not, however, use blindfold and uncontrollably, but with moderation and purpose.

Perhaps the gestural expression is also the balance to the many thoughts, it needs the liberation of the theoretical into a tangible practical. The body longs to be involved in the process, to become "part of the game". The floating, thoughtful construct erupts in a moving, somatogenic expression. Perhaps a work can only become complete if the artist's mind AND body are rooted in it.

Representational / Non-representational

For long periods one could consider Wilhelm Drach's work to be non-representational. But this is only true in very few cases. In his paintings, Drach almost always starts out from the visually perceptible environment and abstracts it. (Although I personally keep the terms "non-representational" and "abstract" strictly apart, since they are actually antonyms in the root. "Abstraction" means: starting from an object, reducing it more and more (to certain elements or the "essential"; Lat. "abstraction": to pull off, to remove). "Non-representational", however, means – as can easily be read from the word – to start from NO represented object.)

Wilhelm Drach is, therefore, an abstract painter, and only rarely a non-representational one. Even in those works which he himself classifies as non-representational (e.g. the diptychs), he states that he was influenced in some way by the optical impressions of his environment.

In the series of "Heads" and "Landscapes", the respective overall titles reveal that the untitled individual works are abstractions of concrete pictorial content. In the 1980s, Wilhelm Drach was even more eager to give titles to his figurations and gave them names such as "Woman with Legs Crossed" (1986), "Cleopatra" (1987), or "The Red-Haired Woman" (1986). Often it is the titles that lead the viewer to look for representational features in the picture and not to see it as pure painting without mimetic intentions.

Drach is attracted by this game, this treading of the path on the borders of abstraction: "In my work, I try to sound out or shift my own previous limits. In a way, my drive is my curiosity. How far can I take a figure, landscape, etc. apart, rebuild it and it is still a figure, landscape, etc." he writes to me (November 9, 2019). It is an exploration and dissolving of the demarcation line between the representational and the non-representational. (Whereby, according to my understanding, even a representational starting point completely abstracted to unrecognizability would still be a representational – but just abstract – picture.)

Wilhelm Drach develops reduced abbreviations in his analytical method, which stand for certain aspects of a body, a face, or a landscape. By using a synopsis of several pictures and by consciously dealing with them, the viewer can get practice in filtering out and assigning these symbolic abbreviations from the pictures. But you don't have to. Drach's pictures do not require the viewer to deal with them as long, analytically and intensively as the painter himself does. He has done this work for us, and so the paintings unfold their effect even without background knowledge and analysis, quite spontaneously and in the moment. Whether they are representational, abstract or non-representational ultimately plays no decisive role for the recipient (in contrast to the painter) – it is only one aspect that can or cannot challenge the ability to recognize.

Basically, it is the optical appearance that interests Wilhelm Drach. What constitutes a landscape, what a figure, what a face? With his "heads", for example, the person wearing the respective head plays a subordinate role. They are not portraits that are intended to tell something about a certain person, to depict his essence, his history, or his personality. Drach is more concerned with the face as (literally) superficial cover. About its colors, forms, and surfaces. Perhaps that is why he calls them "heads" rather than portraits.

Even if it gives the impression that Drach rather depicts the idea of a landscape/figure or a head in his works, it is surprising that there are usually very concrete models behind it: the landscape in the Waldviertel on the drive to the golf course last summer, the snow-covered Eichkogel last winter... or with the "heads": the sumo wrestler on TV at night, the colleague with the dark under-eye circles...

Drach captures these (facial) landscapes as a whole and in detail, filters aspects out of them, reduces, compresses, dissects, assembles, colors. In the end, it becomes the idea of a certain landscape or face, not a concrete image, but a prototypical one.

Old Masters / New Coat of Paint

Once again back to the surface, to the skin that separates our inside from the outside. And to the skin of the pictures, to the layers of paint without which a picture would be nothing but an empty canvas. In an interview, Wilhelm Drach told me that in the course of his teaching at the "Graphische", he told his students to look very closely when painting human skin: "Take a close look at a face, the skin. It's not just one color – nuances of very different colors shimmer through it: here a light green, there a soft violet."

In order to do justice to the multi-layered and multi-colored nature of the skin in the picture, Drach resorts to an old-masterly technique: the so-called layered painting. Titian, Leonardo & Co. used this method, in which many layers of glazed and less glazed colors were superimposed on each other until one started to use more and more local colors at the very top. But the layers underneath, which also contained the violet and green tones, shimmered through to the uppermost levels and, when combined, produced a realistic image of human skin (and ultimately had as many layers as these). A further effect of this

technique is the so-called "depth light": the light that penetrates the glazing layers to the bottom and is reflected from there again illuminates the overlying color particles from behind and thus allows the incarnate parts to shine from "inside". Looking at Drach's paintings, one hardly feels reminded of Raphael or Dürer and one would not assume that Drach's painting technique refers to them. As described above, Drach's works look spontaneously and quickly painted. In fact, he too constructs his colors from several glazing and opaque layers to give them intensity, depth, and at the same time fineness. It is a time-consuming and technically complex method that requires planning and patience. Drach makes contemporary art in an old technique. He transfers layered painting both formally and materially into the present: instead of tempera or oil paint, he applies one layer of acrylic paint on top of another. Drach's pictorial themes are also reminiscent of traditional Old Master subjects: portrait, figure, landscape, and also the form of the diptych recall traditions in the visual arts that go back to antiquity. Drach transfers all these classical pictorial themes and techniques authentically, unnostalgically, and uncompromisingly – but not disrespectfully- into the 21st century. In my view, the aspects just described are quite fundamental traits in Drach's work, all of which combine certain contradictions or at least contradictions within themselves. Perhaps it would be even more appropriate to speak of ambivalences, in the original Latin sense of the word – ambo: both, valere: to apply.

Gestural painting and planned, slow work seem to contradict each other, but in Drach's work both approaches are concurrently and equally valid. Pictorial contents that refer to very concrete models from the environment and lead to pictorial implementations that only a silken thread seems to connect with the original object, stretch this thread between representationalism and abstraction to the limit of tearing it apart. But this stress test also testifies to Drach's ambivalent – indifferent – view of concrete form and its painterly (dis)resolution.

And finally, past and present also take place simultaneously in Drach's works, in that he pays tribute to the technical achievements of the Old Masters as well as the formal achievements of 20th-century painting.

Clara Kaufmann, art historian

in: monograph WILHELM DRACH Malerei 1970 - 2020, Hirmer Verlag, 2020; p. 360