

Brigitte Borchhardt-Birbaumer
2001

Allowing painterly openness The picture series by Wilhelm Drach 2000–2001

In the new series of pictures by Wilhelm Drach from 2000 and 2001, the division into a diptych is only necessary in one case: it is due to the large format – but the structure of the diptych is abandoned, the individual composition without the response of its counterpart is of importance again. The confrontation of painterly surface and graphic trace with temporary haptic inclusions now takes place in one work. A single black character runs as a fluid, broad brush-stroke from top left to bottom right across both joined canvases; as a counterbalance, the artist places the omega-like structure at the top right. In between, a new world of glaze-like stains opens up, slightly structured and also partly applied dry and fluffy with a painter's roller. Strong colors of green, red and light blue contrast with white and black. The unprimed canvas absorbs the thin layers of light paint, darkens them and lets their own color (beige) shimmer through to the surface: the local colors are given a mist-like undertone.

The broad lettering is rounder, loops replace the East Asian-looking angularity, but this development disturbs the painter – his mental ideal does not have this new tendency towards softer forms, and he also has in mind a wider scope for his signs. Crossed out elements are the result of doubt; in the large composition they appear as green, narrow brushstrokes from the center above, like sketched rays of a celestial body, a little deeper again in pink. Color runlets show that the picture has been turned during the work; they remain standing, but are not used as dominant – coincidences are permitted, but not accentuated; control is still there.

The resistance created by black signs has dissolved, above all in the “intermediate images” from the previous block of works to the new. The four to six quickly created individual pieces are without a doubt a liberation from the formal austerity of the diptychs with their haptic-optical confrontations. It is not only the distance from the multi-partite, but also the detachment from the strong sign – a letting go towards spontaneity, emotion in the sense of a painterly open surface, takes place.

Attempts at overpainting could in the meantime be black in addition to warm tones, which now predominate. Strokes become spots, the heaviness of the dark begins to hover in front of violet, white and yellow. A narrow zigzag lettering in yellow covers this black surface accentuated by brushstrokes like an optical trail of light. Wilhelm Drach's new picture series also have no titles, not even numbering; only he himself knows their sequence. They are painted on pure theater linen or Molino with acrylic, mostly unprimed. Two large formats at the beginning still allow for the previously frequent collage of cardboard and earth, bound by traces of paint. But like the sharpness and angularity of the signs, these artistic means diminish in relation to painterly-graphic confrontations. The various possibilities of applying paint from a tube, with a spatula, brush, or paint roller are supplemented by glaze-like or pastose layering, lifting, blurring, and scratching out.

The waning of the dominant signs and the dissolution into the painterly bring with them the optical illusion of a landscape character: the old phenomenon of suspecting the abstract yet representational in the abstract immediately appears. Paths, fields, fog, and wind-swept nature seem to open up – an up and down is not given by the sign, but by mere perception.

In the next series of pictures, these intermediate images, in their bold step, exert their influence into the uncertainty of the purely painterly, but somewhat softened by the fact that the short signs are peeled off with the spatulas or are in themselves only thin and dry. An opposite to the strongly accentuated ones emerges like a “watermark”. In between, the pictures with concrete signs lie over the glaze-like colors and these measure themselves like two warriors against a wide format that is perfectly suited for this purpose. The latter is also one of the most striking innovations in Drach's painting since 2000. The formerly dominant portrait format is being replaced as the tonality gives way to contrasts: now yellow and black, violet and turquoise are often juxtaposed iridescently with red, but also pastel shades of dusky pink and green. The playful handling of cold and warm dispositions is an important part of the new concept, which also has a formal-perspective effect. After the spontaneously created, emotionally charged “intermediate pictures”, Wilhelm Drach again went through a phase of doubt and the struggle for the final composition – perhaps one could also say that a phase of stronger control was beginning again. The use of white as a color or even a flaky structure reveals a working

method connected to the immanent problems of painting itself, which is accompanied by doubt, destruction, and reconstruction (through white layers). An anecdote of the ancient writer and scientist Pliny in book XXXV (line 103) of his "Natural History", which possibly illuminates these backgrounds, tells of the painter (and sculptor) Protogenes from Kaunos, who always applied four layers of paint. Pliny describes the problem of painting the foam of a dog's mouth as follows: "In anxious anguish of soul, since painting should contain what is true but not what is similar to the truth, he had often wiped off the foam and changed the brush, but was by no means satisfied with himself. Finally, out of anger at the artificiality, because it was recognizable (as such), he threw a sponge on the place of the board. The sponge applied the wiped off colors as he had wished, and so in painting chance has created the truth of nature."

So it is the old problem of dealing with chance and allowing chance as opposed to logical control. Still, Leonardo da Vinci or in the last century Francis Bacon have praised and appreciated this principle of chance. But there is already a great deal of difficulty in abstract painting in these statements, and to this are added the remarks about the stimulation for pictorial ideas by clouds or watercolors, which Leonardo took up again from Pliny and apparently spread in his workshop. Even if it is not Wilhelm Drach's intention to deal with an art theoretical question in a practical way, the game and the experiment is still a current phenomenon. In his case, the cloud-like, fluffy structure of the white paint applied with the painter's roller is an important accent. For the white becomes a color with its own effect over the beige tones of the grounds; it no longer serves merely as a brightener or a trace of light.

The struggle to find the textures of the last series of pictures, which on the one hand continue the painterly qualities of the "intermediate pictures", and on the other hand use the step forward by a half-step back to at least one dominant sign in the composition, which measures the height or width of the picture, as a retarding moment. The loss of absolute control and the introduction of unconscious emotional currents will probably find a continuation in the next step: the battle of opposites will continue to shift – where to, viewers can expect eagerly.

In: cat DRACH, Bildserien 2000 – 2001, publisher Drach-Hübler & Socher GmbH, 2001, p. 2/3