

Silvia Gertsch, Xerxes Ach

Embracing Sensation

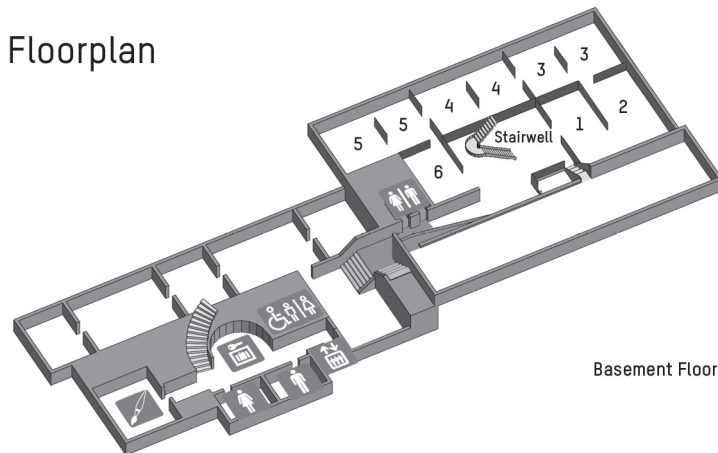
October 23, 2015, until February 21, 2016

With the exhibition *Silvia Gertsch, Xerxes Ach: Embracing Sensation*, the Kunstmuseum Bern is presenting two artists whose biographies are adorned with many art awards, who boast exhibitions both in Switzerland and worldwide, and who are long firmly integrated in the collection of the Kunstmuseum Bern. Loosely adopting the trend of the 1990s in which the Kunstmuseum Bern mounted exhibitions of artist couples, Silvia Gertsch and Xerxes Ach will be showing an overview of their work since 1990. Despite the fact that their styles of painting seem to be different languages altogether, they both strive to find a fitting way to articulate their inner visions. They transform what they see and feel into painting, finding inspiration in photographs and intense aesthetic experiences.

More often than not, contemporary painting challenges the boundaries of representation and the impact of the veritable flood of digital images marking our times, or engages with the canons of art by testing the limits of bad taste through "bad painting", or redefines the meaning of historical icons. In contrast to this, Silvia Gertsch and Xerxes Ach have devoted their art to sensory experience. Although this was always considered secondary to rational understanding in Western thought, current research is now upgrading its relevance. Silvia Gertsch and Xerxes Ach converge upon the perceptive cognitive act, celebrating it in their painting through color, light, and texture. For her part, Silvia Gertsch (b. 1963 in Bern) portrays snapshot moments of young people in summer, expressways at night, and remote landscapes in the medium of reverse glass painting, while Xerxes Ach (b. 1957 in Esslingen on the Neckar) focuses on the micro phenomena resulting from the multifarious effects when the different materials he uses and surfaces he produces refract the light hitting them, creating abstract compositions in this way. Despite their different painting styles—on the one hand realism, on the other color field painting, and thus marking the parameters of contemporary painting—the two artists are very alike in the way they go about their art. As their starting point, they both take photographs that capture fleeting visual sensations. The artists may take them themselves and digitally enhance them, or use photographs they happen to find. Gertsch, for her part, selects real-life scenes of carefree beauty. Ach, on the other hand, looks to close-ups of actual light phenomena, which he then unfolds into spiritual and cosmic views of the world. What both artists share is their fascination for the ephemerality of life, the fleeting evanescence of phenomenological occurrences, as well as exploring intuitive, sensory perception. The exhibition *Silvia Gertsch, Xerxes Ach: Embracing Sensation* explores what the art of the artist couple, living and working in Rüscheegg in Bernese Mittelland, has in common and in what ways it differs. The staging of a juxtaposition of their work opens a path

through contemporary painting since the 1990s and reflects current visual experience shaped by moving images behind the glass of TV screens and the pale glow of electronic light. Even though their styles differ, both artists consciously make use of the element of blurring. In Silvia Gertsch's artworks indistinctness is the outcome of nocturnal lighting and things in motion, while for Xerxes Ach it is a means of imbuing his painting with a spatial quality and pushing the limits of the frame through the radiance of colors. Xerxes Ach uniformly bathes frozen moments of everyday bliss in brilliant light and mystically enhances colored microscopic effects, making them congeal into "images of yearning and spiritual icons", while Silvia Gertsch pursues "inner visions" in "daydreams". Both artists invoke a state of viewing in which an orchestrated interplay unfolds, constantly beginning anew, and is spurred on by aesthetically stimulating the senses. At the same time, this process cancels out temporal experience and brings beholders to immerse themselves in color and light.

Floorplan



Basement Floor

Staircase Room: Current Works (2015)

Room 1: Silvia Gertsch, *The Beginnings, 1990–1993*

Room 2: Xerxes Ach, *The Beginnings, 1990–1995*

Room 3: Silvia Gertsch, *Movies (1999–2002)*

Xerxes Ach, *Transformed (1994–1998)*

Room 4: Silvia Gertsch, *Bathing/Summer Scenes (2003–2014);*

Xerxes Ach, *Colorscape (1996–1999)*

Room 5: Silvia Gertsch, *Paintings of Movie Stills (2011–2013);*

Xerxes Ach, *Painting (2000–2011)*

Room 6: *Spiritual Light (2012–2013)*

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Staircase Room: Current Works (2015)

In her current work, Silvia Gertsch depicts deserted landscapes bathed in the golden morning or evening light. Already during her stay in Italy (2004–2010) she planned to paint her surroundings as pictures of yearning, revealing ambiances that have a paradise-like quality. In this group of paintings she has withheld the signs of civilization, and thus the actual thematic focus of the paintings is paying tribute to light and its radiant energy. The artist intensifies the luminosity in *Secret Garden III* and *Glowing River* (2015) to such a great degree that the yellowish white plane seems to dissolve the trees as well as the water surface, so that the paintings acquire an abstract quality through surreal overstatement. The artworks that Silvia Gertsch finished especially for the exhibition present a break with her art of the previous thirteen years, which largely contained groups of figures or couples. On the other hand, they draw on her *Movie* paintings from 1998 to 2002, in which she would drive along the expressways, preferably at night in the rain, filming on the way to collect visual material for her paintings. While she chose predominantly violet-blue gray tones for her painterly, atmospheric renderings of nocturnal scenes in the *Movie* paintings (Room 3), her current works provide a striking contrast in the use of rich green, blue, and yellow hues, creating a mood of optimism and vitality. Additionally, the virtuosity and the degree of detail that she achieves in the meantime captivate beholders in making the minutest particulars clearly visible, such as the leaves on the trees and blades of grass. Finally, we must not forget that Silvia Gertsch, when she paints, stands before a vertical pane of glass, bending her arm around to paint on its reverse. She peers through the preparatory sketch on the front side to the reverse of the glass pane where she applies the paint. In contrast, the way Xerxes Ach paints is quite classical. The support lies in front of him on the ground and he applies, carefully and in a controlled manner, layer after layer of paint, so that they overlap in complex gradations, melting and blending into one another. His current, large-format works are a tribute to light, too, as velvety, flat areas of glowing light emerging from dark backgrounds. His four square, large-format works are a continuation of the series *Cosmic Light*, unveiling the celestial and spiritual aspects of light (Room 6). Xerxes Ach works with egg tempera paint on a dark background, mixing the colors himself. With each layer of color, he increases the amount of pigment, so that the brilliance and the luminosity of the colors become increasingly richer and more intensive, until he achieves the impression of an overwhelming colored cosmic light that conquers darkness. In the same room: *Voyage* – a short film on the artist couple Silvia Gertsch and Xerxes Ach, duration: 22 min., director: Garrick J Lauterbach, production: Offspace Online

Room 1: Silvia Gertsch, The Beginnings, 1990–1993

Shortly after Silvia Gertsch was awarded the Louise-Aeschlimann Grant, she executed the series *27ICH (27 ME, 1990)*, comprising 27 self-portraits that are all the same size and similarly composed. On a dark background, they are succinct, sketchy depictions of the artist's face seen frontally or in three-quarter view with her hair combed out of her face. The portraits vary from green to yellow against a dark background. Silvia Gertsch painted a self-portrait every day, basing them on one of four different Polaroid snapshots. The face always occupies the same segment of the composition. The eyes are merely hinted at, the expressive green-red coloring, and the loose painting style without preliminary sketches are all manifestations of the artist's defiance against the "ban on painting" predominant at the time. Silvia Gertsch and Xerxes Ach as painters felt as if their technique was an anachronism due to the overbearing impact of new media. Silvia Gertsch confronted the situation by taking up reverse glass painting, in which, similar to video images, the glass lies before the actual scene (and in contrast to normal paintings is at the same time the support). The artist pursued the conviction that "she was painting a mental image before her eyes", and thereafter never left off the technique of "reverse painting." On meeting Xerxes Ach and being confronted by his minimalistic color field painting, Silvia Gertsch's art grew more abstract, but only temporarily. In 1993, she began a series of color variations of blurred spheres in neutral, light-colored spaces—paintings that were actually still lifes of oranges in a kitchen sink. The shimmering effect arises from the additional applica-

tion of subtly colored tones of varnish on the front side of the glass pane, resembling frosted glass in its effect.

Room 2: Xerxes Ach, The Beginnings, 1990–1995

Xerxes Ach's first experiences as an artist were in Berlin during the 1980s, where the Neue Wilde ("Young wild ones": Salomé, Rainer Fetting, and Helmut Middendorf) ruled in the art scene and influenced his work. Then, early in the 1990s, Xerxes Ach went to Zurich where he was exposed to constructive concrete art. Inspired by Adrian Schiess's monochrome aluminum plates, which were executed lying on the floor where the artist sprayed paint onto them, and Thomas Stalder's monochrome works (BILDRAUM exhibition space, Zurich), it was the Blinky Palermo exhibition (Kunstmuseum Winterthur, 1984) that subsequently made the greatest impact on the young artist and triggered a change in his art style. He created minimalistic works, which were based on a collection of colors (scraps of images, drawings, and written notes) and, as an open system, could be rearranged constantly anew, but always in a linear sequence. Trained as a graphic designer, Xerxes Ach went further and started painting, in which field he was self-taught. The sensory perception of color was the focal point of his art. His work underwent various transformations within this thematic field, and the different phases stand out especially on account of the artist's varying notions of what the function of the support is. His application of color and the surface texture of the artworks are correspondingly differentiated. For the group of works *Ohne Titel (Untitled, 1994-95)*, which the artist produced in the early 1990s, he stretched several layers of wrapping paper on frames and painted these surfaces with shiny, semi-gloss, and flat transparent varnishes mixed with pigments. He applied the paint in countless layers and in this way created a homogenous, reflective surface where pictorial space is a manifestation of the reflections of the immediate surroundings and the movement taking place therein. From the minimalistic sequences of monochrome color panels, the artist's development went from there to—in part large-format—seductively shiny abstract color field paintings, which mirror their environment as a realistic element, and, standing on the floor, are suggestive of three-dimensional color spaces.

Room 3: Silvia Gertsch, *Movies* (1999–2002); Xerxes Ach, *Transformed* (1994–1998)

Following the phase in which he used varnish on wrapping paper (Room 2), Xerxes Ach finally took his experimentation with materials a step further. For the series *Transformed* (1994–1998) he first crumpled up the wrapping paper before painting on it, producing relief-like surfaces that reflect light in every direction and, in this way, underscore the object character of the picture. Changing from wrapping paper to aluminum as material for supports increased this effect tremendously. The material highlights the media specificity of painting as a corporeal image, and the mountainy surface forms an attractive but impermeable skin of paint, with color accumulating in the depressions.

Silvia Gertsch too addresses the diverse manifestations of refraction in the reverse glass paintings for *Movie* (1998–2002). They were made for *Freie Sicht aufs Mittelmeer* (A clear view of the Mediterranean, Kunsthaus Zürich, 1998), the famous exhibition that was curated by Bice Curiger and Juri Steiner, where both Silvia Gertsch and Xerxes Ach were invited to participate. The exhibition presented a panorama of recent Swiss art with a focus on the art scene in Zurich, to which the two artists belonged. In the meantime they shared a studio at BINZ39 (39 Binzstrasse), then an abandoned industrial area (Henry F. Levy established the initiative and foundation). As the other artists there likewise worked extensively in the studio building, the two painters acquired the habit of working at night for more peace and quiet as well as space. At the same time this practice led to nocturnal motifs, such as the blurred impression of the tail-lights of cars on expressways or the dimly glowing haloes of the street lights in *Movie*. The source for the dramatic and nebulous light effects were film shots made under poor visibility conditions (fog, rain), which Silvia Gertsch then used as her models for painting. In 2002 she resumed her interest in portraying figures. A group of people on the street with strong backlighting allows a dramatic ren-

dering of light with elongated shadows and iridescent silhouettes. A blinding ray of light vertically cleaves the picture *Movie* (2002) into two parts. The low angle of the backlighting literally obliterates the figures. The new, almost stark directness in which the light appears can be explained also by the fact that, on Xerxes Ach's advice, Silvia Gertsch began working with oils instead of acrylic paint and left off using varnish on the front side of the glass.

Room 4: Silvia Gertsch, Bathing/Summer Scenes, 2003–2014; Xerxes Ach, *Colorscape* (1996–1999)

Most of the colors in Xerxes Ach's paintings have no name of their own. They exist only in the instance of the particular painting devoted to each of them. Thus, every one of his works is the product of decades of experimenting with pigments, binding agents, and supports. His artworks arise from weeks of work, layer over layer of paint. They are consecutive, reconstructed memories of his experience of particular colors or an atmosphere, but known only to the artist himself, who found inspiration in advertising images, books of travel, or magazine illustrations. To an extent they are reminiscences that have been reified into images and whose primary meaning remains elusive. Ach's own experience of color forms the basis for creating a large part of his work. However, the series *Colorscape* (1996–1999) illustrates clearly that his work does not exclude environment as a factor. The surface acquires a rich and ambiguous luster due to the aluminum supports as well as the multilayered application of increasingly lesser pigmented varnishes. The perfection in application conjures up the impression of a distant space of pure color, which enhances the reflective potential of the artwork. The paintings always also contain, if only vaguely in shadows and outlines, a mirror image of their immediate surroundings, taking on the hues and richness of color of the individual works. The static quality of painting becomes dynamic. Color liberates itself from its mimetic function and begins a dialogue with the world around it. Executed from 2003 to 2014, Silvia Gertsch's bathing and summer scenes are likewise radiantly colored. After the completion of her series *Movie* (Room 3), the artist rekindled her passion for daylight, summer, and carefree life. She began taking photographs of young people in everyday life. Gertsch takes as her starting point excerpts from video sequences or a series of snapshots taken with a cell phone camera. Enlarged and permeated by sunlight, luminous colors portray single figures, couples, and groups absorbed in playing games, bathing, talking, gesticulating, or lost in thought. The vantage brings the figures close to the viewer, as if they were photographed in their private spheres. But all in all they are spontaneous moments of worldly felicity, bestowing new motifs on painting and a new—one is tempted to say "unassuming"—image of humankind, which the selfie generation has lost in displaying even the very last private moments.

Room 5: Silvia Gertsch, Paintings of Movie Stills (2011–2013); Xerxes Ach, *Painting* (2000–2011)

Xerxes Ach explores pictorial invention further in his profound study of colors and panel painting. The large-format, since 2003 stringently quadratic, *Painting* series (2001–2011) contains a broad, color-analytical, undefined continuum of related hues. The works fascinate on account of the mattness of the paint, which the artist achieves by using richly pigmented egg tempera and a cotton ground. He has a complementary, pure color illuminate the edges and delicately frame the whole. His painting procedure in comparison to earlier artworks has been reversed: whereas he produced his earlier work by painting countless layers of varnish over one another, determining the overall effect by the layers containing less and less pigment with each application, in his recent, mat paintings he constantly increased the amount of pigment in each successive layer with the most saturated uppermost. From 2010 onwards, his painted borders—intrinsic to the image and often in contrasting primary colors—grow increasingly broad, evolving into bicolor bands that make the quadratic paintings resemble icons with an abstract aureole or nimbus. This is not an arbitrary impression but in fact is a result of the artist's growing preoccupation with transcendence—of the desire to depart from the physical and material—as the thematic focal point of his work. Accordingly, Xerxes Ach says of himself that he ultimately paints

fragments of his soul, images of yearning, and visions: "They are my pictures, derived from within me, and part of me. I paint pictures that I would like to see myself."

From 2010, Silvia Gertsch increasingly turned to movies for subject matter after the couple returned to Switzerland, subsequent to their stay in Italy, and settled in the Bernese Mittelland. Scenes with the British actress Kate Winslet (*Silent Moment* or *Wind in the Curtain*, 2012) alternate with figures out of vampire television TV series (*Eve* and *Vampire*, 2011). At the same time, Silvia Gertsch discovered the opportunities opened up by digital image processing, making it possible for her to adapt image templates according to demands. With the help of this technology she executed more series in which she again slightly varied the motif, such as in *Night Walk* (2012) or in the two different snapshots of a girl running in *Secret Garden I* and *II* (2013).

Room 6: Spiritual Light (2012–2013)

Since the very beginning of the history of Western art, light in painting was frequently linked to spirituality. This was very true in the case of medieval painting due to the religious function of paintings and golden rays of light being associated with spiritual visions. In the case of Silvia Gertsch's art, the light of summer in her bathing scenes (2003–2014; Room 4) morphs into dark hues and colors with golden tones in various nuances. In the reverse glass paintings depicting the interior St Stephen's Cathedral in Vienna (*St. Stephen's Cathedral, Vienna I–III*, 2012), red and green rays cut vertically through the composition and are almost reminiscent of naive medieval representations of haloes. The lighting phenomena are essentially physical—as rays of sunlight that reach from above into the dark zones—and nevertheless suit the contemplative mood of the reverently praying visitors and tourists. Likewise, Gertsch's street scenes at nightfall in front of the Bern department store Loeb (*Late Afternoon I* and *II*, 2012) are tinged with a remarkable gold and yellow hue, as if the young women were marching toward a golden future while the heavens already open up in the background. Finely balanced out in green and bluish gradations of color on the facades of the buildings, the dynamism of the people strolling along is suspended and frozen in the gay, late-afternoon atmosphere. Lyrical moods such as these can be found in Xerxes Ach's *Cosmic Light* series (2013), which are a continuation of the quadratic *Paintings* dating from 2000 to 2011. As far as the quality of light goes, Xerxes Ach's art undergoes a striking change. This is especially apparent if we compare the two *Painting* series (2001–2011, Room 5) and *Cosmic Light* (2013, Room 6). The artist engages with the strategies of monochrome painting in the *Paintings* with their broad frames. Facilitated by an application of paint that does not optically obstruct in any way, the gaze can penetrate deep under the surface and takes in the shimmering light radiated by the paint. This effect is fundamentally underscored by the fact that Xerxes Ach applied the layers of paint from dark to light and constantly increased the amount of pigment. The picture is a manifestation of reversing the relationship of color and light in the history of painting: here it is unequivocally color that produces light and not the opposite. Additionally, the complementary contiguity of the colors chosen by the artist intensifies their brilliance. And furthermore, the contrasting effects of light and dark imbue the light intrinsic to the painting with a sublime quality. The four paintings *Cosmic Light*, which were executed in 2013, endorse such an interpretation. The title of "Cosmic Light" clearly refers to universal powers. However, in contrast to *Painting*, in this instance the light seems animated. It alludes to an unsteady source of light as well as an undefined space. Intensive green, blue, or brown spectra awaken associations of polar lights or interplanetary nebula. The diffused borders and the mysterious traces suggest shifts and movement, even existential processes of creation and metamorphosis. Like Silvia Gertsch's afternoon and church scenes, the artist finds a fine balance between dynamic existence and serene tranquility.

AGENDA

Public guided tours (held in German)

Sunday, 11:00 a.m.: October 25, November 15, December 6/27, January 31, February 21

Tuesday, 7:00 p.m.: * November 3, January 5/26, February 9
* With our curator Kathleen Bühler

Tuesday, November 24, 7:00 p.m. A tour of the exhibition with Xerxes Ach and Etienne Wismer

Tuesday, December 15, 7:00 p.m. A tour of the exhibition with Silvia Gertsch and Sarah Merten

Sunday, January 17, 11:00 a.m.: Tour of the exhibition together with Silvia Gertsch, Xerxes Ach, and curator Kathleen Bühler

Introduction for teachers (held in German)

Tuesday, October 20, 6:00 p.m.

Bookings/Information: Kunstmuseum Bern: 031 328 09 11 or vermittlung@kunstmuseumbern.ch

Guided tours for school classes with creative activities in the studio

Duration: 90 minutes Fee: CHF 140.00

Bookings/Information: Kunstmuseum Bern: 031 328 09 11 or vermittlung@kunstmuseumbern.ch

Workshops on reverse glass painting (held in German)

First the foreground and then the background—layer for layer we experiment with the technique of reverse glass painting.

Subsequently we will examine artworks in the exhibition.

“ARTUR” Kids-Art-Tour

>Saturday, November 28.10:30 a.m. – 12:30 p.m.: “Layer upon Layer”

For children aged from 6 to 12 years.

“Sunday at the Museum”

>Sunday, December 13. 11:00 a.m. – 12:30 p.m.: “Light and Fiction”

Workshop for children from 6 upwards and adults, taking place at the same time as one of our guided tours for the general public.

Bookings/Information: Kunstmuseum Bern: 031 328 09 11 or vermittlung@kunstmuseumbern.ch

Fee: Each/Per person CHF 10.00

Private guided tours, schools

Tel.: 031 328 09 11, vermittlung@kunstmuseumbern.ch

INFORMATION

Curator

Kathleen Bühler

Admission fee

CHF 14.00/reduced CHF 10.00

Opening times / Heures d'ouverture

Tuesday / Mardi: 10:00 a.m. – 9:00 p.m.

Wednesday – Sunday / Mercredi – dimanche: 10:00 a.m. – 5:00 p.m.

Public holidays / Jours fériers

Dec. 25, 2015: closed / fermé

Dec. 24/31, 2015 / Jan. 1/2, 2016: 10:00 a.m. – 5:00 p.m.

CATALOGUE

Silvia Gertsch, Xerxes Ach: Embracing Sensation. Ed. Kunstmuseum Bern, Kathleen Bühler. With essays by Kathleen Bühler, Matthias Frehner, Anna Friedli, Sarah Merten, Jobst Wagner, and Etienne Wismer. 248 pages, ca. 200 color illustrations, German and English. Layout and design: Anna Haas, Verlag Scheidegger & Spiess, Zurich 2015. ISBN: 978-3-85881-474-6. CHF 45.00

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