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Interview with the artist Silvia Gertsch
«Silvia Gertsch, Xerxes Ach: Sinnesreize », 23.10.2015 – 21.02.2016

How do you begin a new painting?
Usually I start top left or top right. I paint a part every day—alla prima, which means wet-in-wet, the opposite of Xerxes Achs's method. Rather than layer upon layer, the picture comes together like a puzzle. The image grows a bit every day. I also have been painting with oils for a few years now. I used to use acrylics but I had the problem of having to finish the entire picture in one night because acrylics dry immediately. I got stage fright every evening, thinking about whether or not to even begin a painting because I knew that I had to hold out until the morning. One day Xerxes suggested that I paint with oils and take it easy. At first, that clashed with my convictions. I didn't want to paint with oils, because they can't be painted or mixed with water and you can't clean the brush easily. Now I paint exclusively with oils, and, depending on the difficulty of a section, can finish a ca. 30 cm × 20 cm area in one day. To reach my daily quota, I have to know precisely what the picture should look like. I have to continue the atmosphere and persevere until the end. In the meantime, I work on my template on the computer and then decide between various versions. Often I compile a template from several versions by extracting the best from each. Then I transfer it to a predrawing on the front of the glass and paint it with oil on the backside. What I like about my current landscape images (pp. 116–119) is that they look gestural and abstract from up close, but from a distance they appear detailed and realistic. For me, it's not about realism, but, for example, how to use abstractly placed spots to depict water surfaces. The effect from a distance is extremely important. Meanwhile, it's OK for me that from up close, it no longer seems very exact.

How is it that your colors shine so intensely, as though they were illuminated from behind?
My theme is light and shadows. What I aim for is that my paintings shine from within. Even though the image is representative in terms of design, ultimately, it is about the abstract qualities of light, its radiance. For a time I thought that light meant a lot of white and not so much darkness. Now I know that a lot of darkness is required to make the light shine. In my current works November I–III (pp. 104–107) and Glowing River (p. 119), which show the back light as a surface outshining everything, the white has to really "explode." The light leaves only the silhouette and generates an aura.

How did you arrive at glass painting, a technique from the fourteenth century, which mainly has its roots in folklore and religious painting?
When I realized that I was a painter, I was faced with the problem of how to distance myself from my famous father. Apart from that, I didn't like painting on canvases, because they soak up paint and offer too little resistance. So I arrived at reverse glass painting. Also, I like the aesthetic connection with a video monitor, which also shows flickering images behind glass. After a fundamental reflection on what an image is for me—namely fragments of thoughts, memories, and visions—I decided that I could paint any picture without paying attention to the logics of reality. At first I chose glass shards, which I cut in free forms and used to decorate the studio I had back then. At the same time, I attended the Fine Arts course at Bern University of the Arts. My wall installation Sterntaler (1989), composed of forty-nine shard images, was a sensation at the graduation exhibition. Shortly after, I won the Louise-Aeschlimann scholarship (1990). Although I had the feeling that painting was taboo, back then, since it had been declared dead everywhere, at the same time, I knew that reverse glass painting was my medium: cold, closed, and yet a window to

another world.

How did the 27ICH (1990, pp. 211–212) self-portraits arise?
That was a confrontation with myself, shortly before I met Xerxes Ach. I created a portrait every day based on a Polaroid photo of myself. The eyes are only alluded to because I wasn't concerned with the gaze or reality. Their expressive coloring and the free style of painting—without a sketch—were an act of defiance against the ban on painting. My belief was, "I have an inner image and I will paint it before my eyes." Until the present day, I can only paint "in reverse." Shortly afterward I met Xerxes. In his studio I was completely shaken by his white chalk paintings. They were fascinating: silence, emptiness, and nothingness. Then (in 1992), I visited him in his studio in Genoa and began a new series, in which I painted variations of orange, in rubble (pp. 213, 214). They are among my most abstract paintings: blurry spheres against a neutral background in bright colors. The flickering came from the additional, gently dyed varnish on the front sides, which generated the frosted-glass effect.
After the studio stay in Genoa, we moved back to Zurich together and also shared a studio. For me, it still wasn't possible to paint human figures. Instead, I painted cold neon tubes reflecting in windows or warm light from lamps glowing in the apartments as we trekked together through the night in search of motifs (pp. 171, 172). For the Freie Sicht aufs Mittelmeer (Kunsthaus Zürich, 1998) exhibition, I wanted to also depict moving light and began to paint highways at night or at dusk. Back then, we were always waiting for bad weather. Rain, fog, and poor vision yielded beautiful painterly motifs with dramatic diffused light effects. In order to capture them, a photo camera was no longer enough. I filmed them, painted the motifs based on video stills, and presented the works hung like film sequences in a series, which is why they're called Movie (pp. 161–170)

Before, you mentioned the resistance that you are looking for. What does that mean?
I need resistance in order to sense myself. That applies especially to glass. It is a surface that you can't go through. A lot has been said about me, that I hide myself and my signature behind glass. But a person doesn't have to reveal everything.

When did you again venture into figurative painting after your "abstract" or "figureless" time?
It was with the two Movie (2002, pp. 87, 88, 108) paintings, which were formative for me. Until then, I had never allowed myself to paint figures. And then one day I came across four "crazy" motifs. That was on a streetcar near the Selnau railway station in Zurich on a summer afternoon. Xerxes saw the people first, in backlight, and literally threw me out of the streetcar. It was a special moment when the sun was shining entirely flat through the buildings, the street became almost white, and the figures cast long shadows. Then, half an hour later, I saw a young woman in the streetcar. Her face was outshined by backlight and thereby fully "erased."(p. 109) I have always been fascinated by extreme light situations. Sometimes light can be brutal. At the same time, they were the first pictures that I did not varnish on the front. Xerxes prompted me to leave them as they were. At first it was almost unbearable for me, because they seemed "unfinished." But they were exhibited like that, and instantly, Peter Pakesch chose them for his Painting on the Move (Kunsthalle Basel, 2002) exhibition. After that, I never varnished again. A short time later, my desire for daylight, summer, and lightheartedness was stirred. I began working with young people having a swim, in magical everyday situations. You might think that they were posing, but they are all sequences from videos or excerpts from snapshots.

Why did you also start working with handmixed paints?
The resin in mechanically manufactured paints irritates the respiratory tract, and since I also like to cook, I saw mixing colors like a cooking process. My homemade paints are thicker and have more body. The stronger pigmenting generates greater color intensity. By now I can immediately see if a painting has been created with paints that have been mixed by hand or not.

After the summer images came the filmstills (2011–2012, pp. 42–44, 48, 111, 124, 173) phase. What inspired these works?
When we moved to Rüschegg after having lived in Italy for quite a long time, in the beginning, I missed the urban bustle and in the first days watched a lot of films on DVD. These virtual people suddenly began to fascinate me. I discovered picture editing on the computer and was able to adapt my templates as I pleased. Then, beginning in 2012, it was increasingly situations in the city of Bern, which I photographed with my cell phone and later realized as paintings, such as the backlight in front of the Loeb department store or people waiting at bus stops (pp. 91–94, 98, 99).

And why have people again disappeared from your most recent works?
At first I wanted to paint seven backlit situations with people and seven deserted landscapes for the exhibition. But I'm starting with the landscapes now: I've had deserted landscapes in mind ever since my stay in Italy. They are landscapes of desire, or dreamscapes. Paradisiacal conditions, which—like the summer images—are realized at the moment, as the signs of civilization are everywhere, and can be found just outside of the frame. The landscapes seem free, unimposing, and have something selfevident about them (pp. 116–119).

Interview: Kathleen Bühler