

Martin Prinzhorn
Always More Than a Picture

The only aspect to remain continuous in painting since the Renaissance is that images should convey a certain tension that needs to extend beyond the first moment of consideration, withstanding the test of time, as it were. The means and ways of ensuring this are immensely complex and have changed radically over the course of time. This change, however, never occurs in a linear way, and any purposeful step forwards occurs, at best, rather sporadically. The medium remains conscious of itself at every point of its history, against which it also vies. Over the last decades, painting has frequently retained a nimbus of the reactionary, which appears to be a tongue in cheek comparison to a past in which it still plays an exclusive, unquestionable role. In this scenario, no connection is made to old artistic objects in an analytical sense, but much rather a hegemonic role of the medium is mourned.

The path on which one can move forward in the present in terms of painting, without nostalgically succumbing to the past, resembles a tightrope walk. It is precisely this opening of the medium, in the course of the twentieth century, that has increased the complexity of the matter. It is not only the reversal of abstraction in a world in which even a monochrome canvas has become figurative but, above all, the visual extensions and transformations which digital media are constantly generating that invite this reactionary view of painting, and thus are simply evoking the past. The 1980s are a prime example of such attitudes: after Conceptual Art, Minimalism and Performance, painting was suddenly redefined in a sense that was based on the implicit promise of return to a past perfect in which one can forget the immediate past. Considering the great mass of 'wild' painting at that time, there were only a few positions that introduced and examined external practices and reflections in painting.

There are examples, such as Christopher Wool and his exploration of writing and text, and Albert Oehlen, whose images were initially determined by various self-imposed conceptual restrictions and, from a certain point onward, explicitly referred to computer graphics and their possibilities. In fact, Warhol and his work with monochromatic surfaces could also be mentioned here. What these positions have in common is a continuous work on the typical questions of what exactly constitutes a painting and how image content relates to objectivity and meaning. And finally, of course, whether and how it is possible to continue to justify painting as an artistic practice. What doesn't work, however, is a simple historical reference that claims an autonomous history of the medium without reference to all sorts of artistic and cultural practices. Yet, this should not be confused with a practice in which considerations unrelated to painting are simply transferred to a canvas, leaving the form of the image unaffected. Components unrelated to painting always appear to be equally vital to the tension mentioned at the outset.

Maria Brunner's art consistently pursues these reflections of painting from the 1980s and 1990s that confronts such questions. Her search for the image begins with photography: at the end of the 1990s, it is the blown-up, blurred images, which already contain an important characteristic of her work, namely a certain torn nature of the image. There is no integrative view into a room or onto dancers, but rather sharp contrasting light elements pushing alongside blurred figures, which have a destabilizing effect on the whole. Anything we normally associate with the medium is no longer valid. There is no reliable image relating one or more stories, but the creation of contradictions in perception instead, which are hardly to be resolved. Clear edges are found in places where the content does not want them, significant figures are brought into a situation in which their subject matter is contradicted. This has nothing to do with abstraction in the sense of Modernism of the late 19th and 20th centuries: there is no reduction extracting the figure or depth from the image, no over-emphasis of individual perceptual aspects pushing others into the background. Much more, Brunner appears to use a cumulative process by adding a layer within the image that bends the content.

Her painting initially appears to be in sharp contrast to the photographic work. Like a flood, montages of brightly colored images spread across the canvas which, in their form, tend to move away from the medium and point towards commercial art, yet without redeeming its contents. The

additive character is now generated through exuberance. Brunner, in this case, quite strongly rebuts any painterly attitude that demands a clear commitment to painting. It almost seems as if the artist, at the very moment she decides for oil paint and canvas, does everything to reverse this decision. Upon consideration, it initially remains unclear why it is precisely this medium that carries these images. Foreground, background and various dimensions spread out, but are never abrogated in their excessively clear, realistic manner. Venus is in ruins, but not broken. On smaller formats, we see blurred images of flowers, which are, in turn, broken by round drawings and stand in contrast to the rest of the image. We actually do not really know what is in the image and what is somehow outside. The connection to computer-generated images is visible, but it does not make any reasonable sense. We thus, again and again, question the medium and its role in the images. Her large-format works on paper are called collages but, in a strictly classical sense, they are not. The parts are not positioned in relation to each other, but are arranged side by side so that in their totality they form a pattern that has nothing to do with the representations of these parts. But on viewing them here, we try to establish a connection.

The obliquity of this kind of painting becomes more and more refined. In the earlier images, it is the mass of the visual stimuli that brings tension and indissolubility. The artist, however, increasingly interweaves her strategy with motifs that at first glance seem more conventional, and that contain references to modern painting. A series of portraits seems to initially refer to surrealistic images, but then there is a perceptible contradiction that prevents a reduction to a surreal subconscious. These images reveal the particular treatment of the background that determines Brunner's paintings ever more in recent works. On the one hand it appears completely outside the spatial context, yet on the other hand the color selection prevents it from being neutral, and despite its ostensible dullness, it still represents a completely autonomous part of the picture. Neither do things appear out of nowhere, nor are they anchored in their background. The shadows in her more recent images might yield a three-dimensional sense, but not necessarily. The choice of color in its delicate asymmetries at first seems to emphasize the flower in the foreground, but after a while the background gains something like a life of its own, and we are again faced with the dense side-by-side of her earlier works.

The empty clothes are, in themselves, undecipherable; their ornamentation is too varied and then, in a strange way, they are also excluded from the image. The background does the rest, the dress appears ever more detached, the image ever more boundless. What looks like the remix of a head by Arcimboldo turns out to be something quite different. Miscellaneous vegetables, foils and other reflective materials form eyes and lips in the image and indicate faces that are, however, instantly disrupted, only then to disintegrate. The fragments somehow refuse to be summed up from one moment to the next. The entire process within the image is very complex: hyperrealistic parts point to a figure both through content and through historical references which, however, never makes it to the foreground; creating a parallel that allows many images to persist. This description also ignores the fact that there is no direction in the image; it is impossible to say where it all begins – with individual fragments that result in a whole and then dissolve again, or in a whole that disintegrates, only to be united once again.

In this sense, Maria Brunner is not an artist who still has anything to do with the targeted project of modern art. Neither does she subscribe to any postmodern arbitrariness; that is, to a point where one might simply relax. Rather, she demonstrates that the basic problem of painting, the creation of tension within the image, is a thing that is not dependent on some modernist paths. Despite many reference points, she is not a media artist who simply wants to examine this problem in the field of painting. On the contrary, she sees those aspects and challenges external to painting as an opportunity to further develop painting and to avoid sliding with it into the realm of dull reactionism. Good painting is always more than just a picture.