

Picture Space in a State of Suspension

In the early nineties, the artist Oliver Krähenbühl (b. 1963) from Winterthur in Switzerland developed a picture language of his own: with transparently applied, overlapping colors, he created multilayered spaces, usually with a cool brightness. Patch and grid became his depictive constants. Starting from his own thumbprint, he arranged patches in such a way that they seemed like spheres or heads and like vessels in an optical reversal. He joined this vocabulary in to dreamlike, surreal landscapes on the hand and puzzling, poetic “Kopfbütengefässe” (“head-flower vessel”) on the other (Ill.3) ¹

Spatial multilayeredness continues to characterize Krähenbühl’s work. At the time, the most recent pictures prove to be extremely complex in their depictive structure. These are based, for instance in “Zimmer mit Aussicht” (“room with a view”) (Ill.15), on elaborate superimpositions, on graduations and additions of such divers elements as three large spheres that seem to curve out plastically, on a surface-like, linear ornamental texture, and on painting executed in an expressive style that extends over the entire surface of the picture. The pink window cross alluded to in the title of the picture (“room with view”) mediates between the two halves of the picture and defines the picture space. Yet a separation into a spatial “before” and “behind” is only imagined, for the individual elements are that closely intertwined: their positions in space are unstable.. the middle sphere could be located both in front of the window cross and behind it. It is the viewer who determines the constellations for a fleeting moment.

The artist achieves the spatial complexity with a technique that involves alternately applying and removing paint. Wiping or partially removing layers reveals what is underneath. Paint is applied to paper or cardboard with the wiping technique, pressed on the support as a monotype. By using stencils, Krähenbühl takes the spatial puzzle even farther.

Unlike with his a

Earlier landscapes, one cannot speak of a hierarchically arranged composition in this current group of works. The distinction between figure and ground proves obsolete as well. Since August 1998, Krähenbühl has consistently entitled the works that he has treated with this depictive strategy as “palimpsestische Bilder” (palimpsest pictures”). This is a reference to the writings from antiquity and the middle ages, where original texts were blotted out, in order to be able to use the writing material again.

A deviation from these works is the more recently created “Garten” (“garden”) (Ill.7), a picture kept in exclusively painterly style, which picks up from the group of earlier landscapes. It is evident here that Krähenbühl has not discontinued the dialog with Per Kirkeby’s painting. Other than this, the theme of landscape, or associations with it, is largely withdrawn from the most recent pictures. The choice of portrait format also marks a distance to the traditional motif. Wit his new artistic praxis- which could be described as the painterly adaptation of collage that conjoins what is disparate – Krähenbühl has transferred his (landscape) spaces to an abstract spatial structure. It may be noted here that his exploration of the ornament and of stylised plant motifs familiar from wallpaper led him in this direction “Katharine’s Room” (Ill. 16).

At the beginning of the 20th century, the exploration of ornamentation led various artists to a new understanding of picture art. Henri Matisse owed crucial impulses to abstract motifs from Islamic décor. An increased interest in ornamentation may also be noted in contemporary art. For the American artist Philip Taaffe, this interest means a continuation of abstract painting.

What has been said in view of Philip Taaffe's work, could certainly also apply to Oliver Krähenbühl's (most recent) painting: "Rather than interpreting the history of 50s abstraction in terms of reduction, a stripping away, a paring down to essentials, Taaffe makes 'abstraction' a process of addition, construction, of incremental embellishment, of layering and fragmentation."²

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¹ See also: Tina Grütter, Das Schöne – neu ausgeleuchtet, in: Oliver Krähenbühl, catalogue for the exhibition in the Museum zu Allerheiligen Schaffhausen, 1999

² Quoted in : Jeff Perron, in: Parkett No. 26, 1990