

Christoph Schirmer

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Christoph Schirmer's works are homogeneous fields of research, whose exploration is the task of the viewer. Whether the latter can tread the same trail blazed by the painter beforehand as "leader of the expedition" is beyond his/her influence – this fact is accepted as a matter of course, for the genre of painting and graphics functions as autonomous organism and this with undeniably powerful artistic results.

A permanent issue for Christoph Schirmer is the question of what it's all for – the thought of still being able to succeed as an artist nowadays; and his answer lies in taking the approach of the research worker. Starting out with a theme which reflex-like stimulates the desire within him for intense engagement, he surveys and stakes out his "territory" and reproduces it – in his case – on the substrate – cardboard or canvas. The artist thus becomes a pioneer figure who is the first to access an "undiscovered country", quasi in the sense of "the first man on the moon". We are the eye-witnesses trailing behind. We shall inevitably never be able to manage the same focus, but by engaging with the work we shall be confronted with the issue of perception per se. And it is this perception – gleaned so to speak from the connotations of Plato's Cave Allegory – that is the secret of Schirmer's art.

"Blastbeat Rhymes" shows a figure sitting at a drum – graphically described and anonymously rendered. Starting out from it – or approaching it? – the space around it is perceived as graphically dissolved, as spatial fragmentation. The "configurations" at top right appear to be geometric motifs, compositional ploys, which hold the picture together in both aesthetic structure and colour. Guided by the title they can be seen as drum surfaces – the various impact directions cause variations in tone, vibration and strength of sound. In the area at bottom left the serially set geometric sequences of circle and triangle can also be read as rhythm – a rhythm produced by the so-called blast beat (a percussion technique often used in extreme metal music). If you now identify the figure in the picture as Oskar, the boy from "The Tin Drum", by Günther Grass, it becomes evident how Christoph Schirmer picks up and "researches" this theme and then transfers it to the two-dimensional surface of the canvas. What matters to him is that as an artist he grasps hold of this anchor and works on it intensively, and then, after finding a solution in painting, shelves it again in favour of the effect. Viewing his own works is just as much part of the final pictorial solution, for the result is in no way programmed. There are no studies or sketches. The empty canvas is the initiator. When the drum surfaces familiar from the computer are painted autonomously on the ungrounded canvas and the subsurface deployed as a haptic solution, the viewer becomes aware of the total depth of this manner of painting. The painter chooses this path to enhance the painterly effect, but on the other hand hints in conversation that the haptic quality really can be interpreted in this case as the sheet music placed in front of the drummer, which is often much-thumbed and crumpled through intensive use.

The concepts of abstraction and objectivity are no longer relevant in the art of Christoph Schirmer. Starting point is the research field of painting and graphics, and a picture has to “last” – as he likes to say. The sole criterion of quality is and remains the work, which, despite thematic constructs in the creative process, can also exist without these explanations; and this is happening with grandiose effect, especially now in his more recent works. They seem much more graphic, also more open, more courageous in dealing with the empty space. Works like “Mater atra” were still strongly defined by a “filled-out” use of colour; now, in the more recent works, the colour palette often tends to be more garish, but there is also a stronger grid structure. Surfaces painted in an organic tangle are superseded by an increase in basic geometric structures – which of course are yet again disrupted and accentuated by the brush technique. Christoph Schirmer has been intensively engaged for some time now in finding solutions in wall work. Multiple substrates are construed and composed as a complete picture. This isn’t about an extension around a centred image, but about reduction, an elemental difference for the traditional canvas works as well. The wall work is approached as a rectangular area into which the individual picture panels are inserted. They are assembled according to a precise grid and play on the entire keyboard of painting. Demonstrating the the current tendency of his interests is the work “Allgemeinanästhesie – Brown Canoe” (General Anaesthetic – Brown Canoe) – could it be alluding to the bathtub in which Uwe Barschel was found dead in the late eighties, or might it recall the canoe of the solitary rower in Peter Doig’s work? To reverse the question of perception: what was actually in this canoe? However, his interests never linger in the exclusively social-critical context that hangs over the painted oeuvre. “Question – Marc” shows a boy who – fearfully? – looks through a door and by means of the panels surrounding him can enter various rooms. The title: Question – Marc: as a question mark? or is it an allusion to Marc Dutroux?

Christoph Schirmer conceives the act of viewing painting as a kind of labyrinth. In every work there is an entrance which everyone has to find for himself. After this, the eye follows a specific grid system and – if lucky – steps back out of the labyrinth. The viewer has thus exited the picture, has decoded the confusion. It cannot and should not be specified whether the outcome is positive or negative. In “Afterimage / Nachbild” specific fixed points are defined by a grid system; these are also to be understood as a grid system for the artist. By means of concentrated observation, Schirmer defines these points as focal points and connects them with graphic lines, in this case starting out from a green line entering the picture at top left. The point of entry is a pivotal point of reference in his work and when the entry lines become increasingly dense as in “Ndrangheta Mikado”, in the first instant the viewer has to rely for the first time on himself. As in the children’s game Mikado, the elements are layered on top of each other. The more lines are taken away, the clearer the view of what is underneath: a woman drawing water from a well. But the title betrays another aspect. Ndrangheta is notorious as the most powerful Mafia organisation in Europe. Countless connections constitute the special feature of this crime network. These connections then re-densify in single points. Points of support emerge for all the lines and the whole work is surrounded by a frame which in its turn holds together, circumscribes and centres the basic image – namely the woman at the well.

Since Christoph Schirmer sees himself as a researcher and his art as a history of perception, it is no wonder that he also describes his path as a gangway of granite upon which artists of the twentieth and twenty-first century are domiciled. This

foundation can be explored and mapped out – the open door of the '80s Neo-Geo is being eyed in curiosity, particularly now, even though this “spying” into the alien space materialises in his work solely as short sequences.

If Schirmer's works once used to be “garish and loud”, today they have calmed down owing to the graphic element – but are by no means calmer and in no way tame. A consistent development, which promises even more in high-voltage fascination.