

## Christoph Schirmer

### Spacey-hybrid image worlds / Hybrid Space Odyssey

Florian Steininger, Curator, Bank Austria Kunstforum, Vienna, 2011.  
Translated by Abigail Prohaska, Berlin, 2011.

Christoph Schirmer's works are a crossover between painting and the virtual digital world of the new media. The digital media per se are available to the artist; why doesn't he operate *with* and *in* them alone without resorting to the vehicle of painting? In progressive and avant-garde terms this would have been the logical consequence. Artists have always exploited the latest technologies and media or had faith in their progressiveness and new possibilities, for instance the machine-enthused Futurists. Photography was proclaimed *the* quintessential avant-garde medium for the twentieth century, followed by video installations and computer programs.

Schirmer "switches" between the currently available new media and the traditional panel picture. The artist favours the intuitive work process and sensuous materiality over the illusory spaces on the flickering flat screens.

The first work step has the artist spilling acrylic paint onto the canvas lying on the floor, producing abstract colour zones. The process manifests itself as a gestural act galvanic with spontaneous aleatory potential. This exhilarating, polychrome surface forms the ground for the graphic, painterly motifs, which scintillesce like shot fabric between abstraction and figuration. A complex network unfolds, a collage of different pictorial motifs, images and structures. It ensues on the one hand from Schirmer's concrete idea of the picture, on the other from the evolution of the process flow. One zone is connected to the next, the one after this is overlaid; free spaces, negative forms emerge, stimulating the artist to new formal creations. Gradually, the horror vacui of the original, abstract colour space is filled with figure and form.

Christoph Schirmer lends the picture the character of a painting by allowing the paint to take effect in itself. It supports not only the illusion of figure and space, but is a material substance on the substrate, and colouristic attraction. Occasionally the painter intensifies this haptic quality by creating zones like a relief. They take effect like application tools in the spacey-futurist design. Just as spacey in appearance is his composition of pictorial spaces, which differs conspicuously from conventional, homogeneous spatial compositions such as landscapes or interiors. Schirmer slurs several pictorial levels into each other, displaces the axis, fans out foreshortened perspectives and oblique lines into the pictorial levels – a spatial kaleidoscope takes shape. As in a scintillessent trick picture, the individual pictorial levels move back and forth. A clearly differentiated figure-ground relationship is waived in favour of a complex camouflage. Added to this is the moment of simultaneity. Instead of a conventional, "impressionist" reproduction of a moment in time, of a situation, we have a sampling effect, chatoyant and enigmatic.

Elementary structures taken from 3D architectural graphic programs or highly developed computer games are infused into the works. Some pictures show image transpositions of vector graphics. This involves a program that measures forms by creating a figure out of individual vectors, producing a skeleton without skin. It bequeaths the artist a graphic counterpart to the picture backgrounds; the latter are abstract in painting technique and colour and in their transparency connect up with the vector images. Another useful tool is the computer zoom function, which in the

painted picture leads to radical jumps in scale and to a rougher and more abstract rendering of the motif. This phenomenon is also experienced by the viewer when standing in front of the picture and scanning the individual segments of the painting in close-up. He finds himself right in the middle of the pictorial collage, loses himself in the vortex of painting. Even from a distance he is inundated with images. The eyes hectically change focus.

For Schirmer, figure and motif stand for statements of content. The painter had also applied himself to an intensive study of Greek mythology, especially of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. The ancient, archaic literature is nothing if not diametrically opposed to the digital expression of his paintings. What they share, however, is the metamorphic procedure, the "sampling" of various figures and events.

Schirmer is not at all interested in a modernised illustration of mythological matter, but in the free creation and interpretation of different media, strategies and sources. As a "child of the screen generation", the artist exploits contemporary technical tools and information media, creating an independent and complex new world of images.

In recent works Schirmer makes more use of a graphic network defined primarily in bright-dark contrast – black lines on white ground. The garish palette of colours retreats a little here. Geometric forms mutate into complicated, multi-layered ornaments, which now and then might remind one of glass windows. On the other hand, they mutate into sign systems, repeatable modules without unequivocal decipherability. The geometric folds transform the panel picture into an interface between factual flat surface and the optically illusionist effect of depth. The grid, employed in Modernism as an important vehicle of abstraction – from Mondrian to Agnes Martin – experiences in Schirmer a post-modern, spacey-ornamental revival: a sampling of Klimtesque decoration and minimalist hard edge. Another decisive feature in the latest pictures, despite focus on the graphic matrix, is an oft-occurring colour scale that transcends the painterly, recalling science fiction films: Darth Vader's humming light sabre in *Star Wars* or the glowing, vibrating trails left by the futurist motorcycles in *Tron*. Schirmer is an avid mountain-bike fan; aspects of speed and MTB design also find access into his world of images. The statically clear picture of reality makes way for a speed-fractured grid. Colour becomes acoustic, absorbs sound, which takes on a three-dimensional, optical and dynamic form. In Op-art, colour gains an optically vibrating quality in the work of Vasarely, dematerialising in the fictional picture space into glowing light particles. Similar kinetic elements can be detected already in the Russian avant-garde in Popova, Goncharova and Rodchenko, who in consequence detach themselves from the painted panel picture and evolve three-dimensionally, as seen in Naum Gabo's moving sculpture in space *Standing Wave*, and later in formations by Zero and Dan Flavin's neon tubes. Despite all these optically luminous vibrations, Schirmer is constant in his commitment to working with the material substance of paint, although he sees himself as an open and multi-stratified mutant. Thus, in one of his latest pictures with the title *Chromosom –Hybrid* of 2010, there appears the form of a fly, an allusion to the classic horror film "The Fly"; a painting metaphor for the eternally metamorphosing "colour body" (in Ancient Greek "chrōma" [colour] and "sōma" [body]).