

Stephan Berg

The cannibalism of colour

Cornelius Völker's paintings thrive on his pleasure in the obvious. Everything in them is designed to lure the observer immediately and directly into the visible context which they themselves have created. Against, in most cases, monochromatic, smoothly neutral backgrounds, his subjects, standing out starkly from the picture by virtue of their isolation from any context, are so luminous and suggestive that it is virtually impossible not to look at them. The looking that accompanies any act of picture-viewing is not in this case a voluntary act on the part of the viewer, but something forced upon him by the picture. Nevertheless, Völker's subjects are anything but earth-shattering themes: towels, buttered bread, skirted women's legs, bars of chocolate, handbags, cakes, dogs, women with vacuum cleaners and men with their trousers down. Everyday sights, thinned out to leave only the most trivial and commonplace. At the same time, all this is presented in such a way that we, the viewers, are inexorably drawn in. A dazzling feast of colour, conjured up before our eyes with impudent nonchalance and apparent effortlessness, appears to have no doubts about its subject-matter, about the concept of the picture or the possibilities of painting. Look here, these pictures seem to say, is there anything wrong about being a painted picture? At any rate, we don't think so! As if the medium hadn't ploughed its way for decades through meticulous self-questioning and ruminated on the growing impossibility of representation and the increasingly exhausted possibilities of autonomy and abstraction. As if, during this long process, formal mastery and assertive gesture had not elicited the caustic reproach of pure anachronism. In fact, a good deal of what makes the pictures of this Düsseldorf artist so striking and fascinating is rooted in the fact that he has embarked on the hazardous enterprise of re-asserting the picture as an act of painting that secures its effect without sceptically founded swathes of theory - but also without evading current debates on this subject.

In essence, these works are fascinating because of the idea of bringing the medium of painting back to itself by linking it substantially to subjects that appear at first glance to undermine this linkage. In the process, paint is often used as substance and material in such a way that it seems to slip into the materiality of the represented motifs. Oil paints are plastered on centimetre-thick to form gooey cakes into whose creamy softness the viewer longs to sink his teeth, and slices of bread, whose juicy, creamy spreads are not represented but literally embodied by the paints. A fine, early example of Völker's highly suggestive intermingling of representation and the picture as object can be found in his chocolate pictures (1992- 1995). True-to-scale enlargements of unwrapped bars of chocolate on canvases measuring over two metres in length, these works' "shaped canvases" are converted literally into gigantic bars of chocolate whose stuffy, musty sweetness one really believes one can smell, but also, with their sober-looking, unadorned grid-type layout, retain a high degree of strangeness and abstractness. Never before has one seen chocolate so

naked, so much itself and yet so totally abstracted and desensualized.

The Swimmer series (1994-1996) also derives its fascination from this apparent incongruity between painting and the painted object. The figurative legibility of these pictures is derived above all from the bathing-capped heads that emerge from the shimmering flood of colour like helpless buoys and identify their surroundings as a flowing surface of water. Völker additionally emphasizes the wateriness of this water by thinning the oil paint so that it runs in films across the surface of the picture, transforming what it is supposed to represent into its own physical state.

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All that happens here, in this ambiguously sparkling intermediate realm, is not derived, for instance, from the longing for the fusion and union of world and image. In fact, Völker displays this formal incongruity on the assumption that there is a deep, unbridgeable gulf between things and their appropriation by the painter. It is the awareness that the means with which the artist works can only ever bring forth painting that motivates Völker to push the physical, substantial link between the paint material and the painted object to the point at which they separate - the moment they appear to merge.

The fact that Völker's investigations are in this respect basic research into the process of painting is demonstrated by the formal arrangements in his works. We are concerned here firstly with the serial character of all his works that grants the repeated motifs of everything from dogs to underpants the aura of a system and thus lifts them out of the netherworld of the accidental and places them into paradigms of a visual grammar that repeatedly and rigorously examines the multi-faceted visual potential of each painted subject. At the same time, the analytical impulse of his paintings can be seen from the fact that they exhibit their subjects in strict isolation and against anti-illusionist, monochromatic painted backgrounds in a way that recalls the placement of laboratory samples on a dissection table. It is not just a formal coldness that wafts towards us from these works but a cool hardness that infuses the underlying structure of Völker's entire oeuvre. What appears at first glance to be complacent elegance and a casual flirt with the superficial visual charm of a stock of trivial motifs proves on closer examination to be calculated bait for a much more brutal and aggressive purpose.

In an interview Völker himself said that he chooses his motifs to sound out, again and again, whether painting will stand up to them.¹ It is precisely this tension that can be felt in his works. When the paint on a kitschy, fluffy lapdog runs down in broad streaks, this is not only the transmutation of paint into something else and vice-versa - in this case into dog's fur - but also an act of violence in which the motif of the dog is coated and plastered with paint until it practically drowns in it. The facelessness of almost all the people that Völker paints expresses not only

the avoidance of historical portrait painting, but also a resolute negation of individual attributes in favor of the fragmented, the decontextualized. Folded hands, crossed arms, bony legs, torsos: the human body as a spare parts store for an eager brush wanting to radically transform everything according to its own logic. At the same time Völker inserts the themes of his paintings into a genealogical tradition of the medium via the formal proximity of these motifs to those of historical greats ranging from Millet to Van Gogh.

Most of his subjects, and particularly the Legs series (1997) and Sweaters (1997-2000), are of interest to Völker in the above context because they are gifted with a pictorial two-facedness. In his pictures they remain both identifiable as credible representatives of themselves and the painting tradition from which they come, yet they also disembody themselves into the metaphor of an abstract painting process. In the Legs series, the centralized skirts are, on the one hand, the subject of the painting and yet, on the other hand, totally self-referential patches of colour that subvert the figurative representation. In the sweater pictures we see not only this act of classificatory ambivalence, but also the moment at which painting disrobes itself and stands naked before us. One does not have to think immediately of the skinning of the Marsyas and recall that Rembrandt, for example, also used this subject to make the brushstroke into an incisive, piercing instrument in order to understand how much aggressive momentum can reside in bands of paint.

This is illustrated not least by the fact that these Sweaters are also cancellations of faces. Here again the type of painting admits both conclusions: that the scene is actually nothing other than the pulling-on or -off of an item of clothing or that we are looking at the partial self-liberation of paint at work, as it

- amorphous, soft and mollusc-like - threatens to swallow up its adversary, clothed, not exactly to best effect, in white fine rib.

This motif of the devouring, absorbing paint is also encountered in the above-mentioned Swimmers, in which the psychedelic flood of paint threatens to pull the swimmer down into its oily depths. Crucial to such a dramatized reading of the picture's plot is the fact that the paint does indeed flow in this case. In a disconcerting way, it deprives these pictures of all fixed points. The streaky, lava-like spread of paint basically tolerates nothing except its own activity which insists uninhibitedly and greedily on presence and totality.

The most direct form of the brutalization of pictured action is offered undoubtedly by the Swatted Putti series created in 1996, in which the chubby, worldly putti are swatted by a fly-swatter on a large canvas. The literal squashing of the figurative, extended back via the putto motif straight into the arthistorical tradition, appears as an act of liberation, which restores paint's intrinsic value, and at the same time as the subversion of this life of its own. On the one hand, the fly-swatter that

causes the worldly little angels to burst into colourful patches of paint is depicted thoroughly figuratively, while on the other hand the impact force only affects the putti to the extent that their figurative readability is disturbed but not entirely destroyed.

The darkest visualization of a concept of the image in which the paint both creates and annihilates its objects is accomplished by Völker in his small-format Ash (2001) cycle. Against a nocturnal background, ash is visible as a white-brownish patch of paint that is encircled by a hint of blue-black smoke: the picture's cannibalism of itself. Of everything that the paint is capable of creating there remains just the terminal stage: a virtually burnt-out residue of ash whose smoke forms a truly transcendental anti-aura around the pathetic little heap.

These are pictures that have combusted themselves to the point that the last flickering of the ash forms the line of demarcation with its own extinction. Such a concept of the picture cannot be reduced any further without losing its self-credibility. But one shouldn't be deceived. In all the pictures by this painter, even the opulently confident treatments of kissing couples or female figures holding vacuum cleaners or handbags, we can find some of this voracious fire of painting that ultimately wishes to constantly combust the objects that it so eloquently conjures into existence.

1 »Cornelius Völker: >Pathos ist mir grundsätzlich zuwider<. Ein Gespräch mit Sven Drühl«, In: Kunstforum 158, January/March 2002, p. 262