

Hanne Weskott: From surface to space

Flatware is a popular expression in exhibitors' jargon for pictures. That sounds disrespectful but only means that – unlike sculptures or installations – they don't take up space because they hang on the wall. This may be correct but they nevertheless need space for their impact to be able to unfold, and indeed they often need a lot, such as Monika Humm's large picture "transition / 4" in the Galerie der Künstler in Munich. It is also a good example for the fact that flatware very often doesn't seem flat but can develop a great effect of depth. This comes about through the illusion of space that the painting creates and thus seems to penetrate the strongest walls.

There are entirely different artistic methods for how space emerges in a two-dimensional picture. The most well known in western art, perceived as the only valid one for centuries, is the use of central perspective. But with the turning away from academic art in the 19th century, central perspective was also thrown overboard and painters reflected on purely painterly means to create the illusion of space in the two-dimensional surface of the picture. That goes well with an art that only observes its own laws. In the 20th century, art had learnt to stand on its own feet and since then has successfully asserted its autonomy. A picture is a picture, no more and no less. It doesn't have to depict or represent anything. The colours are equally autonomous. They no longer stick to objects as local colours but are subject to the artist's free choice, however only for as long as the picture allows. For after a certain point of completion, the wrong shade can destroy what has been painted so far.

As far as the autonomy of a picture is concerned, concrete painting, in which no secret is allowed, no hint of the visible world and of course no allusion to religion and mythology, is subject to the greatest stringency in the area of non-representational art. But that is now more or less water under the bridge because even the "concrete representatives" have opened up so as to save themselves from inflexibility. However not all non- representational art can be assigned to the concrete school. Monika Humm would never describe herself as a concrete painter although her pictures consist only of colour stripes and in no way depict reality. But if somebody believes they can see landscape in her pictures, she is not horrified but explains that not only does she enjoy being in nature but also integrates the pictures and colours she has seen into her art. That can happen very directly as in the mural painting from the series "going on" in which the green of the banister emerges or more subtly as in "transition / 4"

that was produced specifically for the Galerie der Künstler in Munich. Here her colour scheme has kept to the colours suggestive of the Pompeian ceiling frescoes.

The influence of what she has experienced and seen comes out best in the picture series "indian summer" in which the quiet beauty of a late summer day is recreated as a warm play on colours. In 2006 Monika Humm had a study trip to New York and in the autumn travelled along the Hudson. But other than in the series "going on", "indian summer" is not to do with movement and not to do with the overlapping of pictures rolling by at the train window, which already blend into the next impression almost before one has become aware of them. Calm is prevalent in "indian summer", expressed by the wideness of the colour bars. Here a form of composition is recognisable which does without any hierarchy. There is no centre to which the organisation of the picture relates but between the colour stripes there is a well tared balance, so that in contrast to the other picture series, a continuation of the picture beyond the edges is unthinkable. At the same time, no space is generated here. Only when grid structures appear in a second level or a colour thrusts itself to the foreground solely on account of its luminosity or brightness does an idea of space come about. All this essentially differentiates "indian summer" from series such as „going on“ and „transition“, which come across as an excerpt from a larger picture, in which a horizontal movement captures everything as if an intercity were rushing through the country and not as in "indian summer" the unhurried narrow-gauge railway through the late autumn. This excerpt character particularly applies to the smaller formats in which the rhythm of the colour bars and streaks increases to a staccato. By contrast the fleeing movement in the larger formats is suppressed by vertical bars. That tends to be reminiscent of tower-block structures behind the facades of which a lot is going on but where everything is crossfaded by the grid of the architecture. The spaces which emerge behind it do not form a unified space. Other than in the large format "transition / 4" in the Galerie der Künstler, where the fierce rhythm has calmed down again and we experience a picture space which seems to reach to way beyond the gallery wall. Monika Humm achieves this by putting coat of paint on to coat of paint alternating with transparent or opaque layers. The deep picture space in "transition / 4" is not construed but comes about solely through painting. It has no vanishing point that takes the eye into the depth but allows it to roam freely. It has to keep starting all over again so as to discover the secret of the picture. Thus the painting opens up the surface and allows the illusion of space to emerge. The art thereby broadens the viewer's field of vision in a direct as well as in a metaphorical sense.

Dr. Hanne Weskott, 2011 (Translation: Celia Lang)