

“It’s as much about what’s not there.”

Interview: Ursula Ströbele

Ursula Ströbele: In February, von Bartha invited you to make your first solo show at von Bartha Chesa in S-chanf. Now, you’re preparing an exhibition for their gallery in Basel, which will open on September, 3rd. In comparison to the chalet in the Swiss Alps you now have to deal with a different kind of surrounding. Terry Haggerty: I will show wall paintings and a series of panel paintings in different dimensions. They are all new works specifically made for the space and in some ways a reaction to the proportions and scale of the space. I look to make a body of work that is hopefully an engagement with the space, not a hanging of works, but an exhibition. I plan to make some large diptych works, long skinny panels and various shaped works and hopefully a site specific wall drawing.

US: How would you describe the importance of the space itself for the concept of your show? What are the main challenges of this special architecture?

TH: The space is quite unusual in shape and size and feels a little bit like you’re in a space ship that’s moving so slow you can’t feel it. All the walls are different in size and there’s nothing regular about it. There are elements about the space that one can’t ignore, like the length from the entrance to the back wall.

US: How do you prepare an installation in advance?

TH: Usually, I like to visit the space and to spend some time there. I made a few visits this year with different exhibitions installed so could see how the space holds different works. I’ll also make a model.

US: In the past you have become known for huge site-specific wall paintings, for example at the Cowboys Stadium in Dallas (2009). For Basel you have decided to integrate the glass facade of the entrance. Have you ever made a work on a window? What was your intention to make these two wall paintings here?

TH: Yes, I made one window work in 2008 also in Switzerland, Zurich. I only make window works in Switzerland (laughs). It’s not definitive that I will make a window piece but it’s something I am really interested to explore, as the space sits on a very busy intersection with trams, busses and all kinds of transport passing through. In front of the space you can also fill up your car with petrol so it’s in the thick of it and in some way quite a curious location for a gallery. From the glass wall which is the entrance to the gallery it’s possible to see deep into the space and so my idea would be to land an image that rests in this space between the outside and the inside.

US: That sounds interesting. In your recent works you’ve made more shaped canvases instead of classical rectangular formats. But in opposition to the abstract paintings of Stella, Noland, Kelly or Mangold, the canvas is sometimes just slightly shaped at one side. How do you describe the background of this development within your work?

TH: I think what I am trying to do is to place the painting in-between being an object and a painting, whereas Frank Stella’s earlier works place the picture as the object. In some way the image is making the shape or vice versa! I like the idea of there being a contradiction. In a lot of the rectangular works the image distorts the rectangular format and so by making a slight shift in the angles of the panel, it’s an image and an object at once.

US: Do you think the paintings of the Geometric abstract artists, the Minimalists or Hard-edge painters of the 60s and 70s are important sources for you?

TH: Yes, of course, but I am also looking at lots of different artists of this generation not only in painting like Donald Judd, Dan Flavin, Gordon Matta Clark, Lawrence Wiener etc. What’s interesting for me as an artist and a viewer is the clarity of the language and the delivery of the idea. All of these artists worked in a very narrow field of exploration and I’m also working this way.

US: Due to the slight shift of the typical panel form, I think a moment of irritation is evoked and the recipient’s eye tries to verify the asymmetry.

US: Although you do not imitate a special motif in the classical form of mimesis, you also deal with the perception of the viewer by exploring the effects of a spatial illusion. May your work be seen in the tradition of “trompe l’oeil” and its abstract development?

TH: As a student I have been looking at a lot of these works, mainly the images of letters, prints and other flat objects by Edward Collier, Cornelis Norbertus Gysbrechts and Johann Heinrich Füssli. What interested me with these works was that the objects depicted were flat objects made on a flat surface. The illusion is very shallow and the early line paintings I made were really about this shallow space

US: In some pieces the stripes even go beyond the edges of the work and thus underline the three-dimensionality. The spatial presence also increases due to the thickness of the support and it changes into an object. In what sense are these cross-genre questions interesting for you?

TH: I think for a long time I have avoided the shaped canvas. Couldn't find a way in, should it be about the shape or the image, but now I just blur the two and distort the perimeter. Even though the works are also becoming somewhat shaped I'm still drawn to this rectangular picture plane. There's something about the limitation and possibility that keeps me there. I try to hide something with

TH: Some of the images are born out of familiar objects, places and physical experiences. You maybe recognize an element in the work that reminds you of a grill, filing cabinet or whatever and then it's also possible that the work reads like an abstract arrangement that has more to do with a spatial arrangement. Like I said earlier a lot of the fabricated image is out of view and so it's really not what you see, it's what you're not seeing. I like the duality of the image existing on two different planes at once illusionistic and flat, figurative and abstract. In some ways I like the idea that the images don't remind you of anything – they are their own form.

US: Similar to the abstract artists of the 60s and 70s your personal signature, the brush stroke and all gestural dynamic, has disappeared and the recipient's eye is faced with pure painting. I just wondered whether this might be influential for you.

TH: I'm not sure this is pure painting, but there is something about wanting the image to stand on its own and for there not to be any distraction. I want the image to be clear and direct. To allow the viewer to see the image without thinking too much about there being an artist behind it. I have a lot of affinity for the artists from this period and how they moved away from the more gestural painting of the time into a perceptual dialogue. US: According to the paradigm "The power of images", which is discussed in visual culture but also in politics and social science, an image has the power to determine or to create a space. Do you try to integrate your work in the space by emphasizing its contours? Or do you think it is more exiting to evoke a disruption within the local conditions, maybe to change the architectural frame and to deny them in a visual way?

TH: Every space has a different quality and for this particular show I'm not quite there yet with what I will do. There are some interesting viewing angles in the space that I look to explore. Obviously this is a gallery space and people are entering the space to look at art. I try to find another dimension.

US: Is it possible to say that the painting itself becomes part of the architecture and manipulates our viewing habits?

TH: The wall paintings take on the dimensions of the space in a very physical way and allow the viewer to experience the illusionistic image in a real setting. We are forced to re-evaluate the plane between the real and the imagined somehow and are no longer looking at a pictures but an abstraction of real space where the image changes, shifts and distorts the structural elements.

US: And the perspective changes, depending on the location of the viewer...

TH: Exactly, you are moving around the different visual spaces, with the image changing in shape and form. There is no point at which it's fixed.

US: Since our first meeting at "Konsortium" in Düsseldorf in 2005 you have been primarily focused on painting and drawing. Have you ever thought of working in other media, such as sculpture?

TH: Yes, I recently started to think about making some objects that are in the early stages of development which I am very excited about. I hope to start work on these at the end of the year, large gigantic metal folds with thin colored edges! Still early days... contrast full of suspense between the plane surface of the painting itself and the illusionistic three-dimensionality which is created by the rhythm of the colored stripes determines the perception. Is this kind of dialogue between the recipient and the painting intended? How does your work guide and influence the viewer?

TH: Up to a point the works set up a perceptual situation where certain areas are activated to create a slippage in the information track, lines becoming form, but it's not just about the lines forming a dimensional object, it's as much about the space between, the negative, where pockets are formed. This is why the paintings are made with so many layers to create a

smooth surface where the background and foreground operate on the same level. of the panel. Flat lines on the surface, dipping out of view into the structure of the panel. It goes back to this idea of contradiction, where on one level there is the illusion, but at the same time the lines are very much flat on the surface and the mere question this image could be or not opens up a more conceptual dialogue.

US: Is it rather that you are interested in the typical parameter of a painting, like surface, form, shape and color? I think in a way you try to figure out the boundaries of a classical painting. TH: In some ways I'm drawing attention to those boundaries by taking the image to the edges of the panel for example. The whole painting surface is activated from top to bottom and side-to-side. Illusions are created and flattened. I'm fascinated by the space in painting and what it can be. the folded works. It's as much about what's not there.

US: Do you think the title changes the way the works are perceived?

TH: I wouldn't know! I'd hope people would find new meanings, not from the title, but from looking.

US: Sometimes a stripe composition calls associations to serial structures or allover patterns of the urban context, such as facades of skyscrapers and radiators. The color and the sequence of stripes in Lungs (2011) for instance, remind the viewer of an abstract pair of lungs. Do you refer to similar objects as an essential source of inspiration? Or would you say that the process of the image conception is mainly underlined by Frank Stella's radical diction "What you see is what you see"?

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