

Robert Fleck: A central Position in Painting

The pictorial space is very large. It seems even larger than the already oversized painting, which covers most of the wall; it seems to be infinite in the expansion along a plane that characterizes this painting. At first glance, we perceive an intense glow, pure color, usually in a single shade, with which another, related shade is sometimes coordinated in agentic dialogue, but the one, intense note of color always remains dominant. On second glance, the painting turns out to be extremely dynamic. The structure of the painting, the visible brushstrokes, and the traces of dripping painting clearly do not follow a predetermined plan. In their details, they seem anarchic, even if a large, dominant move in one direction (top/bottom, left/right, etc.) structures the painting and lends it support. By the third glance, the eye has grown somewhat accustomed to the unusual visual experience, which shares almost nothing with the visibilities of everyday life. Now the reality that the painting spreads out before our eyes can already be somewhat differentiated. The painting is ultimately completely based on the antithesis, indeed violent conflict, between light and color. In Herbert Brandl, that struggle is in part between the white of the canvas and the bright colors and in part between the white and colored paints on the same canvas, as in his grass and algae paintings since 2005.

In Brandl's paintings of the first decade of the twenty-first century, this conflict multiplies the intensity of both opponents-color and of light-and lends them a fresh energy, which gets by without artificial applications of paint or spectacular contrasts. As soon as the eye has adjusted to these intense planes of color and light, it becomes equally evident that their formal language walks a thin tight rope on which abstract, spontaneously drawn lines and connections between planes sometimes appear to be the subject matter of the painting, before a thoroughly figurative approach, characterized by great simplicity, becomes evident at the very next moment, only to dissolve again into the experience of the nonobjective image.

The eye thinks it perceives something like a surface with grass growing on it, or algae moving underwater, or something like a partially cloud-covered mountain, like a sunrise or sunset, but the abstract pictorial values nevertheless immediately regain the upper hand. All of this is achieved without effects and with a naturalness that accounts for the high quality of Brandl's oeuvre, especially in the current decade. 80th these things are related to the fact that they are, from a technical perspective, classical oil paintings that dispense with the artificial effects of acrylic and other synthetic paints, while a rapid painting process that merely recalls previously seen photographic images ensures the dynamics and decisiveness necessary for the pictorial structure. Herbert Brandl's current painting is an important contribution to a central question of the art of this period: namely, to the possibilities of breaking free from the previous century and its aesthetic standards. Even early in his career, Herbert Brandl was strikingly independent of the currents of the zeitgeist and hence with the associated major formal paths. The early paintings are usually thick volumes of paint in which, as far as the motif is concerned, countless layers of paint-in a formal idiom that is sometimes abstract, sometimes figurative-overlap and cancel each other out, while the various colors shine through in places and even break through here and there. The result is an unusual pictorial construct that is quite innovative in terms of chromaticism. Back then Herbert Brandl would paint over any remnants of figuration with a final layer-very much with the pragmatic intention of refusing to provide occasion for any discussion of formal innovations. Those paintings earned him an important place among young contemporary artists in the 1980s, thanks to the freshness and the aesthetic independence of his painting, which participated in the renaissance of that medium after the period from 1965 to 1980, when an aesthetic marked by minimalism and conceptual art exerted hegemony. Herbert Brandl's painting of the 1980s was received, on the one hand, as a very original contribution to the rediscovery of bright colors in painting and their experimental use, something he shared in that period with the most important painters of both the older generation and his own. On the other hand, however, despite his prominent position in contemporary painting-including participation in the Nouvelle

Biennale de Paris in 1985 and in the exhibition *Hacken im Eis* (Hacking in the ice), curated by Ulrich Loock, in 1986-Herbert Brandl maintained a striking and almost exemplary distance from the dominant artistic debate of these years: namely, the discussion of postmodernism or, to put it another way, the question of how to approach the formal vocabulary of modernism as the defining art form of the twentieth century.

In retrospect, this debate over how to approach the formal vocabulary of modernism represented the great, enduring paradigm not only in the 1980s but also well into the 1990s, with the renaissance of conceptual art and the interest in antiformalist strands in the modern art of the twentieth century. The offshoots of this question of how to deal with the vocabulary of modernism continue to have an influence into the new millennium. Herbert Brandl's work in the first half of the 1980s seems to have been all but unaffected by it.

The amorphous states of his paintings from that period adeptly avoided the iconography of abstraction and monochromatism and also undermined any figurative connotations. The significance of Herbert Brandl's singular artistic position was acknowledged in the early 1990s by his inclusion in three international solo and group shows that would play a crucial role in the artist's further evolution: *documenta 9* in 1992, directed by Jan Hoet, where Brandl's paintings were shown next to works by Isa Genzken and Gerhard Richter; the exhibition *Der zerbrochene Spiegel*, organized by Kasper König and Hans Ulrich Obrist, an overview of painting seen in Vienna and at the *Deichtorhallen Hamburg* (with paintings by Herbert Brandl on either side of the end wall), whose breadth of scope has yet to be equaled; and the comprehensive solo exhibition at the *Kunsthalle Bem*, organized by Ulrich Loock in 1992.

These international exhibitions gave Herbert Brandl the courage to intensify his conception of painting, which he had developed in the relative remoteness of the Viennese art scene, and make it more radical in several respects. His earlier symbolic idiom, created with thick packets of paint, was concentrated by means of planar approaches, both in the silver paintings of the first half of the 1990s and in the varnished-looking multicolored paintings of the second half of that decade. On the one hand, decisiveness thereby obtained a new, central role in Brandl's painting. It marks the two central groups of work from that decade. On the other hand, the complexity and diversity of a pictorial idea not tied to forms and objects was now produced by several deliberately employed artistic means, and no longer by his almost organic growth and superimposition of layers of paint of the 1980s.

The two essential work cycles of the 1990s are both autonomous and self-contained. A Herbert Brandl retrospective could demonstrate their pivotal position within his oeuvre. Brandl's painting of the 1990s occupied an important position in general during that decade, which, to judge from the international discourse on art, might be taken to have been almost devoid of painting. The interweaving of decisiveness, the reduction of artistic means, and the intensification of the internal complexity and unpredictability of his paintings make the contextualization proposed by Peter Pakesch, the curator of the exhibition *Herbert Brandl, Albert Oehlen, Christopher Wool* in Prague in 1994, seem very convincing. All three painters made these fundamental aesthetic decisions in the 1990s. They also performed comparable bridge-building functions in the important discussions of painting in the 1980s through the 1990s and into the renewed boom in painting in the present decade.

Herbert Brandl's works of recent years contrast with this prehistory in that it has been liberated in two ways. This dynamic concerns, first, the use of larger formats, often in dimensions that exceed what can be directly controlled physically. The decisive effect of this derives from his decisions to paint these canvas in a single sitting; to apply a watery ground, so that all of the parameters within the painting process can be shifted and to climb completely through these supports, which sometimes fill an entire wall, during the painting session to achieve a motif that was only vaguely

sensed previously. This newly rapid painting process lasts, as a rule, just twenty to forty minutes, since Brandl is painting wet on wet, and the painting can no longer be altered subsequently. This heightens the tension within the painting and intensifies the conflict between color and light, since in this brief painting period essentially only one color can be applied to the canvas as the dominant one. Hence the entire work has to be built up from internal variation, either in the relation of this one color to the white of the ground or in its mixture. The intensity of this act of painting remains characteristic of the resulting work, while the internal differentiation within the palette is based both on the long temporality that the painting radiates, despite this intensity, and on the approach to the motif, no matter whether the motif ultimately finds itself turned toward the nonobjective in a given painting or whether the painter decides to permit a hint or partial significance of a figure to remain.(...)

In Herbert Brandl's oeuvre this maxim legitimized and encouraged his interest in images using photographic and other technology. They are evident only very indirectly, barely perceptibly, in his work, but at the same time they are of fundamental significance to the inner tension and orientation of his paintings and their tightrope walk between abstract and figural qualities.

Peter Weibel's idea, which he often expressed around 1980, that painting, whether or not it happened to be experiencing a renaissance at the moment, had become one medium alongside all the others helped protect Herbert Brandl against the neoromantic tendencies that were later widespread in his generation, the young painters of the 1980s. It was also an antidote to the overestimation of painting and the desire, also common among the painters of his and other generations, to substantialize it and make it absolute in the context of the expressive means of contemporary art.

The comparatively modest self-determination of painting in Herbert Brandl's work that results from seeing it as one medium among others also takes into account an objectively derived minority view in contemporary art that saw painting in the context of other visual media, which has emerged over the past twenty-five years along with the dominance of photography and the moving image. It is precisely this state that makes the relationship of painting and photography so singular and yet consistent in Herbert Brandl's work of the first decade of this century.

The photographic image serves not as a model but as a memory, which runs parallel to the spontaneity of painting without standing in its way. This more direct employment of photographic images in Brandl's painting began with the first large large-format mountain paintings from 2001 on. They begin not with a photographic image as such but with the artist's close observation of a possible route of ascent on a famous mountain-at first usually Mount Everest, using the photographs with which practiced mountain climbers prepare for an ascent. It is thus a distant memory of a specific photographic image or of an ensemble of photographic images that helps Herbert Brandl to remain on his path, as it were, not to lose his orientation, during the intense painting process on oversized canvases that he executes in one sitting.

This approach to photography in the context of contemporary painting is characterized by an unusual freedom. The photographic image is no longer a model to be copied, as it has been in most of figurative painting since the 1960s. Brandl's painting goes beyond this relationship to photography, which is in some respects dangerous, since it once again makes room for the dilemma of strictly nonfigurative painting, which ties a painter to one variation or another of the formal vocabulary of High Modernism- usually to geometric abstraction. The free use of photography in Brandl's paintings of the present decade has shielded him against the often constricted formal canon of purely abstract painting in the art historical situation of High Modernism, which is omnipresent but cannot be repeated.

Herbert Brandl's approach to photographic images and to the artistic tightrope walk on the line between figuration and abstraction has become increasingly free and self-confident over the past decade. Although they are not calculated paintings but are rather, quite the contrary, based on impulsive and improvised painting processes, whose results can scarcely be predicted when the act of painting begins, these paintings find a particular inner foothold on the boundary between various possible readings, all of which are related to the mutually stimulating conflict between light and color.

Already at the beginning of his career in the 1980s, Herbert Brandl had made a habit of looking at many photographs before starting a painting. Something that was originally done using the long rolls of paper used to develop photographs for archival use is now achieved using digital technology that rapidly flashes through the photographs on a computer screen, allowing him to view hundreds of photographs in just a few minutes. This has led to an especially casual approach to dealing with the images that interest the painting, for any number of reasons, as perhaps periphery inspiration for his paintings. With this free attitude to photographic images, on the one hand, and with his abstract approach to the painting, on the other, Brandl is not alone among the younger painters of recent years. He has, however, formulated this double proximity and distance with particular clarity and made it the supporting structure for a style of painting that seems to have largely broken with the defining antitheses of the painting of the previous century and has become one of the few manifestations of twenty-first-century art that has made it possible to sense an artistic space beyond the world of ideas of twentieth-century art.

When we said initially that Herbert Brandl's painting of the decade now coming to a close represents one of the essential examples for the possibility of breaking with the previous century, we were addressing an art historical problem that, though it has not been addressed much by contemporary art criticism, represents one of the great questions of the art of this period. At the beginning of each century, artists face the challenge of the new century and the associated processes and developments, which can scarcely be predicted in advance. For important artists, breaking away from both the hidden and explicit norms of the important art of the previous century, finding new latitude for art, was never a matter of invention *ex nihilo* but rather an act of Hegelian "sublation," which does not throw the baby out with the bath water but instead makes it possible to see and experience the painting of the earlier century in a new way.

Herbert Brandl's painting since the year 2000 demonstrates this quality. It enables us to cease to perceive the tradition of the twentieth century as a burden while setting out on radically new, simplified paths toward the combination of light and color. And it concludes from the omnipresent availability of photographic images in the era of digital technology that a distanced memory of certain of these images can enable one to paint seemingly classical paintings of unusual freshness, tension, and power of invention.