

Goodbye Kamchatka

Helmut Federle: the late work

Abstraction and daydreaming, these are related matters. I look at a Suprematist painting, a kilim from Konya or a piece of Mayan ceramics, and instantly I am carried away by a shape, a colour or surface, by textures, intricate ornaments or elegant figures; they take me to a place where the inner frequency is triggered; a thought, feeling. Agnes Martin used the words "abstract emotion" for her work. And there are other examples. Consider the opening sequence of *Kung Fu* (1972-75) with a young David Carradine. This starts as a familiar story: a solitary man walks down the sand dunes of a desert. His gaze is serene, he treads with grace, there is wisdom in his movements. He seems in harmony with his surroundings.

Then the perspective shifts and the abstractions set in. Dazzling sunshine: the camera captures after-images; its hard specks puncture the lens and the delirious hues fan out. Eerie music: metallic sounds run in a far distance like a trickling stream, but there's no water in these parts... And amidst these scenes of a harsh, forbidding nature—as if the organism in distress musters the stillness within and makes itself a zone of endless sensibility, a space for the mind to linger—suddenly the finest of memories are being played; the formative experiences of a boy who under tutelage of a master became a Shaolin monk, and a man. The sun's after-images resonate in these impressions; for one thing a bright light shines in them.

Invited to ponder Helmut Federle's "current work" I abide; I sense a break in his art around the year 2000, new beginnings... But, today I still feel the spark of so many works from his middle part (1980-2000); they speak to me, seem "current"; I will have to consider them. Anyway, chronology in art is overestimated; cycles and "the return to (sic) the same" are important; that is where beginnings occur. Helmut Federle was a distinct voice in the art scene of the 1980s and 1990s. He exhibited in esteemed art venues in Western Europe and the US and he spoke in public fora on the importance of the intellectual and aristocratic fosterings of art. His work takes part in the canon of modernist abstraction, in that context he is a young scion whose art connects with, e.g., Donald Judd. Several drawing series display the progress of sequences: the calm change of a black rectangular shape on a white ground, the subtle scintillation of intersecting forms, or the complex rapprochement of black bars (standing and lying and more or less interlocked).

I have always felt the pull of a feverish aspect. Colours swelter, shimmer or they dazzle us in works such as *Flower of Sadness (La Fleur du Mal)*, *Dark Night Three* and *H. Fridjonsson's New Corridor* (all works 1984). These small but powerful paintings have strong (under)currents of fierce or mixed or troubled emotion. In the early 1980s a particular colour appears in the work, that of a mercurial green-yellow, that is being associated with *angst*; Federle has called it "a suicidal colour". This colour occurs in characteristic paintings, large semi-monochromes that feature shapes. In these years the signs and letters (in particular the H and the F of the artist's name) and symbols appear, a growing realm of intriguing figures relating to both a personal world, and to cultural traditions that saw signs as epiphanies.

And yet what in essence drives the artist is often so mysterious... While I was re-reading the texts on Federle, I came across a pungent statement. In an interview with Bernhard Bürgi from 1986, Federle talks about his arrival in New York in 1979—it led to a 4-year *sejour* and a confrontation with American culture (the art and the physical landscape) that was crucial for developing his vision—and there he mentions anger as the source for one particular art piece: "This first painting [*Untitled* (1980, acrylic on paper, mounted on aluminum, 2 parts)] somehow mirrors the way I was torn at the time. There is something extremely emotional and aggressive about the composition and the application of...paints, something ...destructive."¹ These words make me think of fierce music, underground, punk & rock (indeed somewhere else—I do not recall the exact place—Federle said that he has felt attracted to underground culture). But when I look at the painting(s) that he mentions, I see a yellow opening, a door which leads to, or is, the light...

Federle's work re-connects with a certain momentum of early modernism(s) and the appearance of the forms of geometric and vegetative abstraction (Mondrian, Malevich, Kandinsky). The work somehow replays this momentum, but with a great uneasiness. The signs and shapes appearing in his work are off balance (in general), as if they have arrived at the wrong place and the wrong time. *Untitled* (1990) is a typical work. With a ground executed in restless grimy green-yellows, this big painting reveals an almost haunted atmosphere, an underworld of sorts. Mentioned colours are translucent—several layers of thin paint have been applied like in watercolour—giving the painting intimacy. The green-yellow works as an expanse, an indefinite or vegetative space, think of seaweed floating underwater. On the ground, in the space, there are two large shapes painted in dark, muted tones. An O floats comfortably around and an H, cut in half, turned on its side, lingers at the edge. "How do you feel?" is the question I would like to ask them.

¹ *Abstract Painting in America and Europe* (Vienna: Galerie Nächst St. Stephan Rosemarie Schwarzwälder, 1988), p. 139.

Essential about Federle's art is that it juxtaposes contradictory phenomena and features differences and (what we tend to see as) opposites and has them interfere with and penetrate into one another. His abstractions defy figurative painting—compare Federle to the late Philip Guston! His shapes and signs build on early modernist abstractions (Malevich) but spatial depictions and atmospheres refer to a Romanticist legacy (Friedrich) *and* Nordic symbolism (Munch). Many have noticed the Romanticist aspect; as far as I know no one has suggested that his art has *duende*; the black sounds of the artist/poet wrestling with death (F. G. Lorca).

the late work

From 2000 onwards, new work crystallizes. Productions are concentrated and precise. There are "closed" work clusters, produced within a limited time span, other works form "open" groups and reflect long term concerns. The first series is a transition. Something occurs here that I will describe as a new approach to the eye's imagination (the inner eye). Perhaps this turn was inspired by the lore of tradition, Leonardo advising the beginning artist to study and draw a wall, see the lines, discover the universe hidden in a spider's web. In *Für die Vögel* (2000) a shift of perspective is staged (think of *haiku* and *tanka*, old poetic genres where the viewpoint is not that of a poet but lies with nature). Dark forms appear on shiny grounds, we cannot identify them directly, they keep their distance. Each work is in a monochromatic background, gold and copper creating a satin-like luster, delicacy and robustness. Forms or figures or textures give a feeling of *frottage*, as if there's always more to see. First I thought I saw some of nature's imprints: the lines in a landscape, the tautness of a mountain, the relief of steep rocks. Today I see façades, high towers, a newspaper page, the echoes of the city. And I hear a soft and forbidding tone, as if all the noise of the world has to be kept at bay...

The search for the light, the movement to the source and the passage it involves is central to a group of works featuring a luminous central section, like an organ that evokes notions of vulnerability or receptivity. Here inner- and outer world come together. *The Seven Doors of Jerusalem V* (2010) refers the idea of a holy place and pilgrimage. The title refers to the seven gates of the Old City of Jerusalem, built by Suleiman the Magnificent, that are still open today. This composition has a succession of pentagons that slide/hook into one another. The hovering interlocking shapes build a spiral leading to an opening, the space that breathes freedom. Here geometry meets religion and life philosophies. The plane form of the pentagon is very old. It recurs in several other recent works, for example in *Painting for Lee Harvey* (2009) with a similar configuration of interlocking shapes. But here there is difficulty, obscure edges and a disturbance in the way towards

the centre, like a movement in reverse. An even more complex work where the centre and light source is eclipsed, is the painting *The Kandahar Conviction* (2009). This atmospheric work relates to religious intolerance, its often gruesome effects.

The *Ferner* paintings (2012-13) focus on the circle. These are phenomenological studies, to begin with. The circle appears, thick or thin, the circumference line varies. The circular shape was not painted with a brush, but came into being via a very slow process where vegetable oil is poured onto canvas and seeps or sinks into the fabric. The surface is "painted" with oil and/or acrylic—often we still see the original tones of the canvas fabric in a soft encounter with subdued shades of colour. These works have very sensitive tones, as we look, a circle appears and it disappears, then once again, and we fathom and sense what is depth. The works open a zone of sensibility; they enhance/enlarge perception. About these works, Erich Franz wrote, "Every perception is questioned...".² The *Ferner* paintings are *mirages* inviting the viewer to surrender. They unveil enchantment and restraint.

At this point, terse observations. 1. Federle's late work reveals a greater grasp of space, both a concrete presence and spiritual refuge. There is more space in the work, the connection to exterior space (the world) is stronger. 2. This *engagement* with the world, also a confrontation, is furthermore elaborated in two branches that run through the oeuvre. Many titles mention the proper names of persons or places; the artist rubs against individuals and their legacies (artistic or other, e.g., Andy Hug). 3. Formations, the "inner poles" are reconfigured: a) Connect (the need to ...; this is an endless desire); b) Solitude (it was always there & is the complement of a)); c) the Wanderer. Today the wanderer becomes pilgrim; the artist confronts himself with his religious doubt. We encounter desolate beauty, ground broken, in a painting called *God* (2000-2003). And in *Song for Golgotha II* (2004/2010), with dazzling rays—Ensor's halos come to mind—of a white-yellow, severe and disorienting light overwhelms us. But these paintings should be seen obliquely too, in relation to Federle's "bad work", e.g.; a piece like *The Background Chronical IV (Reactionary Abstraction, 2014)* reflects faith and doubt and other ways.³

A series of commanding silkscreen prints with black figures on gold leaf surfaces suggest sacred geometries. The works radiate enormous tension. Symbols and forms and configurations refer ancient traditions, alchemy in the west, magical thinking in the east, and they convey the sense of foreboding—presentiment and

² Erich Franz, "Inner Seeing", in: *Helmut Federle. The Ferner Paintings* (New York: Peter Blum, 2013), p. 32.

³ Cf. Joseph Masheck, "What May Be Considered the Religious Aspect of Helmut Federle's Work", *Helmut Federle, American Songline* (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2012), pp. 242-251.

excitement. The "Heaven" form from the *I Ching* (a trigram of "stacked" bars) resonates in *Untitled* (III, 2012/2015) - perhaps... In *Untitled* (NSG II, 2012), a figure resembling an incrypted form or flower shape, is stranded in a desolate area: no way out. I associate it with a blocked heart. *Untitled* (2012) is another composition with bars on top of one another, one half is in a perfect shape, the other half desintegrating. Gold and darkness... Ashes and hope... I recognise a Romanticist aspect, the need to face destiny, an urge to contemplate/allay *fatum*.

The Enormous Room is a highlight in the oeuvre. In 2017 Federle made this work for the auditorium of Swiss Re Next in Zürich. Made in situ and with a crew of experts, a painting with golden colours—actually fine combinations of green and yellow—covers four walls. Called a "walk-in" painting by the artist, we're invited to immerse ourselves in a surround environment. Shine and golden spell relate the work to the enchanted realities of Yves Klein and James Lee Byars. Federle's painting attests the inspiration of eastern calligraphy and the nature renderings. We see the shapes of reed moved by wind, but there are many other shapes and figures, e.g., geometric contours that frame emptiness... A black horizontal bar vibrates at the left side on a wall, in an upper region; an intriguing counterpoint.

The artist has created a place for daydreaming and I imagine music here. Yuan Jung-ping is a master of the guqin, he plays this old instrument of lore. *Lament of Departure*: the first seven notes evoke a landscape, and then the musician starts to speak/sing, he recites a poem of Jiang Kui (who lived at the time of the turbulent Song Dynasty) aka the Hermit of the White Stone. The last stanza goes like this:

"And I didn't take your pair of scissors with me,
but if I had, I still couldn't cut
these thousand binding, silken threads
of melancholy exile."

Mark Kremer