

On the Artwork of Jens Stickel

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Reading traces commonly aims at the past. With the help of more or less prolific vestiges, the searching eye attempts to reconstruct what there was and how it happened. Vivid images can emerge from a sequence of suggestive relics. So it is obvious that one speaks of “reading” traces. This line of action is seen from the perspective of the reader. It is his eye that looks back in time, towards that which may have occurred in a certain way. If you change your position, and take the perspective of that which is read, the arrow of time can change direction. Traces come and go and follow. Hardly anything leaves no trace at all, and a collection is always in the making, with new entries being registered continuously. Traces are picked up rather than picked out in this observatory. Reading becomes more of a question of exposure and accumulation.

Alone in a landscape, in the middle of a fallow ground covered only by a sparse layer of primary vegetation, stands a bright yellow canvas with not exactly small dimensions. The painting has no architectural protection whatsoever, and other conservational measures such as a frame or edge protectors are also nowhere in sight. So it is not surprising that—as one steps closer—more and more marks and impressions are visible, strewn across the yellow expanse. Seen up close it turns out that a number of the traces found their way into the painting during its creation, they announce themselves from deeper layers of paint. The progression of paint and texture apparently went hand in hand. The painting is still open to receive further impressions—its situation makes this clear.

Yellow and big and glad to step outside the doors of the exhibition venue, debonair in defiance of the weather—Jens Stickel often introduces his work this way. Once they’re inside, the pictures tend to withdraw from the designated wall space in a distinct way. They close in on the edges of windows and the corners of rooms, lean against walls as if they were set there temporarily, or stand in the middle of rooms supported by wood brackets. All of these aberrations are not simply imposed on the paintings, the paintings are confided with them.

The artworks themselves already speak to this attitude. When, for instance, different colors meet and collide in a painting, the contrasts aren’t complementary, but they are significant. The radiance of each hue is tested and heightened by the other sections. There is a similar effect with the compositions. When they are based on simple geometrical shapes like rectangles, rhomboids or circles, even lines run across the paintings’ surface, and yet every piece is recognizably made by hand. Both the application of paint and the contours of the edges bear witness to this. The selected geometry contributes clarity without becoming too rigorous. And when the chromatic and compositional order takes shape as a tricolor, the familiar motif appears ends up appearing in a variation of shades. The row of standardized national colors gives way to a new diversity. Color, geometry, theme—each pictorial means is subject to imposition and confidence.

In the pictorial processes explicated so far two very different methods intersect; reduction and accumulation. These are neither contradictory nor do their results clash, as they interact reciprocally through their chronological separation. Reduction comes first: The number of visual means in use is limited. The palette has only a few hues, and the compositional repertoire is straightforward. Yet these aspects of reduction do not constitute the goal, but rather the point of departure for the artistic process. The reduction does not aim for the hermetic—on the contrary, the second factor,

accumulation, asserts itself from here. The specificity of its use consists of processes with open outcomes. For instance, exactly how the external impact of footprints, dust, fibers and splintering will manifest visually in the layers of paint is not foreseeable. The same applies to pictures with paint rather poured onto them than applied. Until the paint dries, it is left to flow freely, resulting in flux states of mixing in certain areas. With this they bear witness to color's inclination to blend and its fluid, highly versatile character. But the geometrically structured artworks are also not only about their reduced formal properties. The contrasts they strike lead to a chromatic space where shapes interrelate as areas on a plane, but also in terms of lifting and lowering. And the execution by hand inscribes its own deviations into the paintings' geometries, enriching the structural rigor with singular vibrancies. This is how the color-field paintings take on three-dimensional space. They act as membranes not just for light but for reactions.

These visual practices resonate particularly in two further bodies of work, a series of compact concrete casts and a stock of photographs. The concrete pieces build on basic geometrical shapes. Some of them are objets trouvés, blocks that were previously parts of pavement, others, especially the elliptic pieces, come from the studio. They share the characteristic of a receptive surface with the paintings—and this finds explicit expression in the elliptic works: cast in empty paint buckets, the concrete absorbs residual paint. In comparison, the photographs pose a larger medial differentiation, even stronger when they are exhibited, but also when they appear in publications. This is because photography generally conceals its process of formation behind the final visible outcome. And yet the photographic images express the visual interests that the paintings and concrete sculptures also work with: For one, surfaces bearing traces are at the center of attention, and besides this the pictures show objects that were party to special treatments, indentations and abrasions, often traces of deviant or disconcerting behavior. Something always steps out of line.

The initial reduction opens up space for more to happen than its repetition and affirmation. A palpable passion for crossing lines is visible. The large formats exhaust each situation they encounter, first the given space of the studio, then of the exhibition venue and its rooms. And not only in terms of their size, but also with respect to their total physical condition the paintings do not shy away from contact with their surroundings. On the contrary, they seek and provoke it. With all of their high spirits, an appetite for risk is always at hand. It's not just the top coat of paint that risks a sunburn. The artistic action faces the music. Because what will be seen then is lying in the wind.