

Christine Streuli

In discussion with Roman Kurzmeyer

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A short while ago, the author Bruno Steiger explained to me in a discussion about language, writing and painting, that what interested him in my art was the fact that it was possible to create an „intimate publicness“ with the tools of painting. My exhibition in the Swiss Pavilion in Venice is called COLOUR_DISTANCE. This guiding principle can be found on the large sign painted in bright gloss paint on the outer wall of the pavilion. In this exhibition I am consciously and explicitly addressing the public and demanding full and personal participation. Intimacy and distance face each other as opposites in both these comments. Couldn't the discussion of these terms serve as the springboard for thinking about my painting and the exhibition in Venice?

Roman Kurzmeyer

Your painting has the effect on me of a resonating chamber for the process from which it came. The templates and stamps with which the representations are depicted on the picture carriers produce a mediated picture. You use reproductive techniques to create uniqueness. The subjects and the colour appear to be highly emotionally connoted, but the pictures give an impression of coolness. I am not aware of intimacy and distance in their role as opposites but in the crossover of their commonalities. How did you come to this specific procedure and why does your brush always play a secondary role in your art?

Christine Streuli

I gave up using oil paint and brushes when I was studying art in Berlin. I was much too impatient, too highly-strung; I wanted to work more quickly, fluidly and immediately. At that time I was consciously searching for harder, non-virtuosic procedures that would facilitate a certain speed and clarity for me. I no longer wanted to be bothered with the oily massaging of coloured surfaces, I wanted to work cumulatively: clear layers, sharp edges, precise settings. It was very much a question of presenting artistic decisions with courage, not endlessly analysing or covering them up.

Roman Kurzmeyer

And what did you learn from this change in the artistic process?

Christine Streuli

I began by drawing simple forms, masking them, cutting them out with a Stanley knife and covering them with quick-drying acrylic or filling them with spray colour. What thrilled me about this procedure was that I practically no longer needed to touch or attack the canvas, and so it was no longer possible to read any personal or expressive activity in the work. I wanted to be able to say precisely what, why and how I was doing something. Talk about the production of art became important in itself. A few years ago I added the printing plate and monotype as artistic procedures – also with the aim of being able to print off a shape several times at speed without the energy used in the action being reproduced one-to-one in the painting. Accepting chance occurrences became all the more important, since every print became unique. These procedures enabled me to create distance and to look at what I had created as if it had not been painted by me.

Roman Kurzmeyer

Did you have role models, painters or works of art that inspired you as a painter in this new direction?

Christine Streuli

I have never had role models; there were always only partial aspects that interested me in the works of various artists for a while: The clear, cold forms and drawings of Gary Hume's aluminiums; Christopher Wool's use of print and templates, the reduction to black and white; Jonathan Lasker's baffling ability to be able to transfer his small colour sketches to large formats so precisely that they lose nothing of their ease and intrinsic sketch-like quality. I was intensely fascinated by Warhol's pictures that he painted together with Basquiat: those loosely painted dialogues. I hoped to be able to learn something about humour, decisiveness, and coolness from an intensive study of the works of Sigmar Polke. I inhaled everything I saw with my eyes. Today this, tomorrow that, no absolute line: one thing led to another. I digested and reworked it all in my painting.

I was always interested in old art and cultures. So today I'm happy to talk about the fantastic pencil drawings of Chris Ofili and the ancient grotesque paintings in Italian vaulted cellar roofs in the same breath; or about complex Australian indigenous painting and the Roman encaustic portraits of dead people that I saw in the Cairo museum. And so my Kelim rug from the 20s finds regular confirmation when I look up from Yinka Shonibare's catalogue and contemplate it.

No doubt this eclectic mix throws up lots of questions for an aesthete?

Roman Kurzmeyer

First of all and primarily, those concerning your aesthetic stance, since this list could lead to the conclusion that you give priority to form over content.

Christine Streuli

I prefer to look at this differently: form is content.

However, this is a strong artistic statement if you can achieve it. To load form with content and to contextualise it, to place it in the context of „here and now“. All the artists that I have just listed are consciously using the power of form with every kind of form that they use. It's a question of consciously outlined and consciously placed forms. Some of these artists use and process formal picture material that they find in their immediate „culture-free“ environment, they free it from complex situations, thereby lending it enormous importance. Simplicity becomes engrossing. Whether this is Warhol and Basquiat working with fragments of advertisements released from their context until they just become form, or Gary Hume sketching clear outlines from photos and transferring them, or Christopher Wool working with black colour and simple templates creating texts: form becomes content, text and statement, because it can assert itself and this is what interests me. Both are equally important, because one can't exist without the other – I don't give one priority over the other. I'm working on their interchangeability.

Or, to put it another way, it's the same as when my Kelim rug from Iran in its bright colours and wild pattern imitates the wave-covered surface of the water that could have been induced by the throwing of a stone. So, for example, I use the same vocabulary that I would when thinking about the content and stance of op art artists.

Of course, I can't speak for all the artists mentioned – but I do think that this is a partial aspect of their work – art letting form become content. This is closely connected with the conscious or subconscious inclusion of the immediate environment.

Roman Kurzmeyer

How did you go about working out your exhibition concept for the Biennale?

Christine Streuli

Since I contemplate different scales, shifting perspectives and various dimensions in my work, I am very interested in the idea of conceiving the exhibition in the pavilion as one integral work. I did not want to construe installations or disguise the heavy roof construct behind a dust-sheet. I included the room and, for example, the sometimes strong play of sunlight and shadow, in my conception.

One of the challenges was that this time, what I would otherwise put in one single picture had to be reflected and painted in a whole room. In so doing I did not want to let the gaze rest at the edge of the canvas: it continues, always going further. The large format becomes a small detail of the whole. A roller-coaster of focusing and over-taxation.

Roman Kurzmeyer

And what about the sign at the entrance to the Swiss Pavilion?

Christine Streuli

The work for Venice begins with the proclamation.

The visitors to the pavilion are prepared for what they will see there. Signs warn, forbid, challenge, announce, inform, seduce. This is also true of this sign.

I'm equipping the public with my language!