Painterly-Virtual Metamorphoses

"The medium is not the message, but the form in which the message is communicated.[i]" Arthur C. Danot's postulation applies to a categorisation of art forms that is simultaneously post-modern, yet classical in terms of communication media. It is in stark contrast to the thesis of l'art pour l'art: in radical formations of abstract painting, for instance in Ad Reinhardt's *Black Paintings* with their "apocalyptic mood", the medium is congruent with the message. Ever since the dawn of the avant-garde, painting had begun to separate from its function as purveyor of an extra-pictorial world and to celebrate art as art in reference to itself. After the calendar date of the modern movement had expired, a contextual understanding of painting once more gained momentum, which allowed references to other contents, visible for example in post-modern, figurative painting formations. Nevertheless, they were all linked to painting tradition; they were resourced from painting achievements within the rectangle of the picture prior to the avant-garde, above all from figurative expressionism. In the more recent past and present, one often encounters work implementing the new media and their contents and motifs as a reference source for painting. In Peter Weibel's exhibition *Pittura Immedia* (1995), for example, the focus was on the charged polarities between painting and the new media. Among them were works by David Reed, Ross Bleckner, Peter Halley and Albert Oehlen

One exponent of this crossover from the younger generation in Austria is Christoph Schirmer. His paintings are harbingers of the virtual, digital world. The digital media are in any case available per se to the artist, so why doesn't he operate *with* and *in* them alone, without recourse to the vehicle of painting? This would be the logical consequence in terms of the progressive avant-garde. Artists exploited the latest technologies and media, or believed in their progressive quality and new possibilities, like the futurists with their enthrallment with the machine. The medium of photography was hailed as the quintessence of twentieth-century avant garde, subsequently followed by video installations and computer programs.
Schirmer switches between the currently available new media and the traditional panel painting. He finds the intuitive work process and sensuousness of material in painting, and not on the smooth, flat interfaces of the digital world.

The first work step consists of the artist spilling acrylic paint onto the canvas lying on the floor, creating abstract colour zones. The process is manifest as spontaneous gesture loaded with aleatory potential. This polychrome surface forms the ground for the graphic, painterly motifs, which are shot through with iridescent alternations between abstraction and figuration. A complex network, a collage of various images and structures emerges. This is firstly a result of Schirmer's concrete idea of the picture, and secondly of the fluently evolving work process. The next one is coupled onto one of the zones, the next is layered over; free spaces, negative forms emerge, which inspire the artist to new form creations. Gradually the *horror vacui* of the original colour space encloses itself with figure and form.
Christoph Schirmer lends the picture a painterly character by allowing the colour to work on its own. It serves not only the illusion of figure and space, but is both material substance on the picture surface and colouristic attraction. Sometimes the painter intensifies the haptics by creating zones like a relief. They function like applied tools

in the futuristic, space-age design. The composed picture areas also evoke a space-age vision, noticeably different from conventional and homogeneous spatial renderings such as landscapes or interiors. Schirmer slurs several picture layers into one another, twists axes, fans out shortened perspectives and oblique lines into the picture plane – producing a spatial kaleidoscope. Like a picture puzzle, the individual picture levels move forward and back. A clearly differentiated figure-ground relationship is put aside in favour of a complex camouflage. Added to this is the moment of contemporaneity. Instead of a conventional "impressionistic" reproduction of a moment, of a situation, a scintillating sample.

Christoph Schirmer uses the representational potential of the new digital media. Thus there is the influence of elemental structures from 3D architectural programs, or from highly developed computer games. The latest pictures contain visual transpositions from vector graphics. In this, the program for instance builds a figure out of individual vectors, which form a skeleton without skin in order to measure forms. In this way the artists gains a graphic counterpole to his abstract pictorial grounds – based on a painterly approach to colour – which combine with them in their transparency. Another useful tool is the computer's zoom feature, which leads in the painted picture to radical leaps in scale and to a rougher and more abstract rendering of the motifs. The viewer, too, experiences this phenomenon if he or she stands in front of the picture and traces the individual segments of the painting close up. He finds himself in the middle of the pictorial collage, loses himself in the vortex of painting. Even from a distance you are overwhelmed by the flood of images. The eyes constantly have to adapt focus. This visual experience is comparable to Jackson Pollock's monumental Drip Paintings; only that in the case of the all-over pictures the viewer is entangled in the abstract net of the action painter's linear cosmos.

For Schirmer, figure and motif stand for conceptual statements. The painter has recently engaged in an intensive study of Greek mythology, especially Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. The ancient, archaic literature is more or less diametrically opposed to the digital expression of his paintings.What they have in common is the metamorphotic procedure, the "sampling" of various figures and events. Schirmer is in no way concerned with a modernised illustration of mythological material; what matters for him is a free creation and interpretation of various media, strategies and sources. As a "child of the screen generation", the artist makes use of contemporary technical tools and information carriers, creating an individual and complex, new world of images.

by Florian Steininger, Curator BA-CA Kunstforum, Vienna, 2007.

translated by Abigail Prohaska, Berlin, 2007.

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[i] Arthur C. Danto, *Die Verklärung des Gewöhnlichen,* Frankfurt a.M., p.224, cit.: *Pittura/Immedia: Malerei in den 1990er Jahren,* ex. cat. Neue Galerie am Landesmuseum Joanneum Graz, ed. Peter Weibel, Klagenfurt 1995, p. 27.