

Clearly, abstraction today works to make its own space.

Frank Stella, *Working Space*, 1986¹

Clara Brörmann

Working on the Picture

Perception

Like a fingerprint, bright stripes are positioned on a geometrical background in dark colours. On the bluish-black surface, red triangular shapes encounter one another and are crossed by black line formations; yellow stripes above and below frame what takes place in the painting. On closer examination, one recognizes that these stripes were peeled off, revealing a brighter, earlier layer of the painting. The fuzzy margins of the lines testify that the process of creating the painting involved digging into the layers of the painting. At the same time, at the corners there are stripes that have been painted over and not taken off. Our gaze wanders between the pictorial elements and inevitably tries to penetrate the manifold layers of the work.

Spiegelung - Spiegelndes 6 is the title of this recent work by the painter Clara Brörmann. The work is part of a series with the same title that was created between January and March 2013. Clara Brörmann frequently works in a parallel fashion on several works with the same theme, so that her abstract paintings develop in series. In this process, she makes smaller and medium-large formats² – abstract, geometric compositions where the beholder initially perceives individual shapes, but almost simultaneously realises that the painting is composed of several layers superimposed on one another. The titles of these series are themes that are relevant for the artist at the time, derived from her life or from her engagement with theory or literature. Currently, she is at work on a series with the title *Vermöglichen*, which refers associatively to the use of this term by Jean-Paul Sartre, just as the series *Spiegelung – Spiegelndes* takes its inspiration from theoretical terms, which she takes up and processes in her paintings.³ Thus the series titles operate also as a possible extended context of perception

¹ Frank Stella, *Working Space*, Cambridge/London 1986, p. 167. In this text, Stella attempts to place abstract painting into a line of tradition in art history in order to posit possible developments beyond their tendency for self-referentiality. He positions himself as a modernist calling for the extension of formalist abstraction into the spatial.

² While the artist has hitherto been concentrating on small formats, because she addressed the painting as an opposite, in 2013 she also started painting works measuring 150 x 200 cm.

³ Jean-Paul Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* appeared in 1943. In his main work, Sartre develops some of the central terms of his philosophy. The terms “enabling” and “reflection” (*reflet* and *reflexion*) are not theoretically analysed by the artist. They interest her merely associatively as subjects of her paintings because they describe

for the beholder.⁴ But it is not always inspiration from theoretical writings that determine the title of a series. For example, in 2012 she made a series of paintings with the title *Bild im Hier + Jetzt*. In *Bild im Hier + Jetzt 4*, white triangles break through black circles, and all that is visible of formerly black areas are smaller, black rectangles. Sometimes, lines can be seen on the lower layers that outline shapes that are not carried out in paint. Which shapes were first? What is behind the visible layers? In these works, too, by removing parts of the painting, and painting over other parts, the artist addresses the conditions and materials of the development of the painting, and emphasizes that paintings are made, and their materiality. Crucial for Brörmann is her interest in the complexity of paintings and the knowledge that we can only ever see a small part of what the painting actually contains: “We are always confronted with a surface, and in reality, a painting contains a whole piece of life. It is fascinating that paintings can be alive.”⁵

Being Made

Clara Brörmann uses for her paintings usually mixed paints. Through the processing, the paints often lose their shine. The choice of colours is determined not just by technical considerations, but also by the meanings that are associated with certain colours. Brörmann is here influenced by her environment and everyday life: “For example, with ultramarine I think of ink for a fountain pen. Or I think of the fact that a yellowish white has the same colour as masking tape. And then there is this orange that is on all of Berlin’s trash cans.”⁶

For her paintings, the artist uses oils in combination with acrylic binder. Individual layers are applied with oils and at the same time treated with acrylic putty or paint. Working with various painting materials makes it possible to treat individual layers in later steps, like sanding them later or removing them entirely from the canvas.⁷ At the same time, she keeps in mind the possibility of painting over other parts or layers. Whether the artist decides to take one of these steps is not determined ahead of time, rather, it develops over the course of the work.

While the reflections and thoughts that arise from the artist’s current life situation or from her engagement with theoretical or literary texts, and that form the foundation of her work, are

processually a non-linear notion of time.

⁴ Although the self-referentiality of abstract painting is here not broken down by emotional, narrative visual content, as Stella describes in reference to classic painting, an offer is made to engage individually and intellectually with the visual content of the paintings.

⁵ The artist in an e-mail correspondence with her Berlin gallery on December 5, 2011.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ The later removal of layers is made possible by the use of different bases (oil or water) of the paints used.

made accessible to the beholder only indirectly through the titles, her continuous planning and discarding, the thoughts about the way a painting is produced, its construction are all made visible to the beholder, whose gaze is directed by the work.

The revelation of how a painting is made is thus crucial for the perception of Clara Brörmann's works. The paintings thus enable the beholder to sense and understand the creation of the paintings between thinking and acting, and the results of this in terms of the materiality and complexity of the painting in the form of a specific temporality.

Temporality

Thus Clara Brörmann's works are not just abstract paintings that can be perceived objectively; rather, they pull the beholder into the painting, as it were, by making the way it is produced transparent. The beholder's concentration is directed to the materiality of the painting, which gains a spatial quality, and seems almost like an archaeological object. This archaeological dimension of Brörmann's paintings results on the one hand from the haptic quality the paintings gain from the way they are produced in layers. But the beholder also, analogously to the process of creation, enters the painting through the process of perception. This perception takes place gradually through grasping the manifold layers and pictorial elements that, superimposed on one another, lead the beholder into the space of the painting. This the space of the painting unfolds not so much "cinematoscopically"⁸, but rather "telescopically" into the depth – and this happens anew with every beholder. The notion of the picture articulated in Brörmann's abstract paintings is thus not so much a modernist one that a subjectivised one that is open for the individual gaze, which it puts into motion. This movement is inherent to the interior of the pictorial space and also determines the specific form of temporality that applies to the perception of the works. The perception of individual pictorial elements and layers results in a movement between individual elements of motifs, which combined into a flow constitute the painting. In this duration⁹ of perception, the painting is extended layer by layer into the depths of the pictorial space – as it were *ad infinitum*.

⁸ Stella uses this term in *Working Space* in reference to Caravaggio, who, Stella argues, in his paintings creates an animated pictorial space between the figures, whose quality could also be fruitful for abstract painting. Stella (1986), p. 4.

⁹ The use of this term here should be understood to draw on Henri Bergson's term *durée*. In contrast to time, duration does not have a spatial dimension, but instead is grasped by consciousness as a flow of perceptible moments. Thus in this essay I speak of temporality (as opposed to time), which manifests itself in the perception in time (i.e. during a duration) in the pictorial space.

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