

Moderne Kunst Nürnberg

Silvia Bächli: Far Apart Close Together

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Transforming the Grid

Silvia Bächli's brush drawings boast the type of sophistication and presence that allows them to illustrate without actually portraying, because what she shows is always taken to the kind of limits at which the balance of the unambiguousness of the symbol becomes precarious. What the actual circumstances are remains undecided, although they are clearly outlined and although absolutely nothing is left to chance.

Bächli's brush explores and it does this with great freedom, with zest and with a precision that is, with reason, reminiscent of East Asia's long tradition of ink painting. It is obviously the virtuoso mastery of this technique and the ability to surrender this control again at the decisive moment that connects these two worlds. Bächli's splendid drawing abilities and her virtuosity in allowing these to be incorporated almost incidentally allow her to create those innovative areas which mean that her pictures are constantly opening and closing.

In 2011, Bächli produced *Red Space* (the provisional working title, at least) at the center of which were acrylic and gouache drawings created using a pigment called "English red". 25 brush drawings each sized 75 x 55 cm comprise a grid which aspires to reinvent the universe of this very structure. When the artist investigates the group structure, once again, what this means is basic groundwork in which the various interpretations of a basic grid structure are expanded to produce something new, in this case, an ensemble that fills an entire room. In what is clearly intended for orientation purposes, there are four organic symbols executed in several different watercolors on book paper in the smaller format of 62 x 44 cm. The change of perspective is radical and is closely connected with Bächli's work process that makes it possible to put an entirely new spin on this kind of grid, one of the key structures in 20th-century Modern Art.

A horizontal line drawn with a rough brush and dry paint becomes, almost abruptly, the line of the horizon. The way that Bächli varies her brushstrokes is highly sophisticated when, using the direction adopted by European handwriting, it moves from left to right and then, on the same sheet and now drawn with the left hand, it progresses outwards from the middle in the opposite direction, with the paint being drawn contrary to the way in which viewers are used to reading it and thus laying a significantly different trail. The very act of reading the nuances in Bächli's drawings is a pleasure in itself and promotes our ability to follow things actively. It seems unlikely that viewers will ever grow tired of looking at the sensual variability of these brushstrokes that become concentrated as they approach and cross the page, lose themselves in fraying lines or join up to become a network, forming a strong vertical.

The verticals are like bars, lending rhythm to the flow of the horizontals which illustrate a temporal process of genesis. Accordingly, hung in two lines one over the other on the wall, the drawings initially create a irregularly staggered structure that appears to stretch out into the room itself. Viewers will always start by reading two or three drawings as part of a whole because the uniformity of the structure suggests precisely such an interpretation. From the different approaches evidenced they will deduce indications for an overarching interpretation of the series until the versatility of the brushstrokes and of the individual pictorial structures once again destroys the idea of a common ground that the viewer is looking for. This process is repeated over and over again until it gets beyond the boundary of what the viewer has

already seen and calls for a new explanatory model. In the chosen arrangement, these grid pictures form a new autonomous space, one that could perhaps be viewed as a projective representation of an overarching perspective. At any rate, the insistence on the line as a basis for expression links Bächli with the work of Agnes Martin (1912–2004), who never saw her grid structures as something serial but always as individual expressions that conveyed a sense of contemplation in the face of nature.

In Bächli's work, internal space opens and closes up, sometimes giving the appearance of flat projections and sometimes almost realistic illustrations of figurative filaments and small tubes to which the flexibility of the language employed by the brush appears to lend volume, a dimension, a materiality. The masterly way she wields her brush allows her as with the abbreviations of East Asian calligraphy to draw with the freedom of the almost incidental. As soon as the images flow too easily, Bächli rigorously discards the relevant drawings, the same is true if they do not flow easily enough and the paint begins to clog, to become too coarse or too ornamental, the brushstrokes too playfully caught up in the incidental: her premise is clarification. And this is why in Bächli's oeuvre the discourse on one of the primary structures of contemporary art is so fruitful. The space of the drawing breathes and pulsates in a very anthropological sense: with the horizontals as horizons and the verticals as being. This interpretation is doubtless extremely abbreviated but it is as radical as are Bächli's drawings. In 1993, for the "Artists Against Torture" Donald Judd (1928–1994) portfolio produced a two-color woodcut, 60 x 80 cm, using a red grid structure which he placed over one of his characteristic frame elements. Reading this on the basis of the context, it would seem obvious to associate the bars of a prison. However, this interpretation immediately falls apart in view of the fact that, very much in line with Judd's perceptual premise, the red grid structure appears to hover over the image of the frame and to be moving away from the latter. The English red used in Bächli's space and its open structure lend the latter something comparatively immaterial and floating whilst, at the same time, accentuating real time and real space.

What has, until now, been omitted from descriptions of the *Red Space* is the four drawings that, as the nucleus, constitute an alternative reality to the horizontal/vertical structure as it were. These are fragile, lyrical notations that add something approaching an antithesis to the grid in the work: complicated interconnections of curving lines with softly flowing colors mixed from a watercolor box. But it is worth considering one of the drawings more closely at this point as it appears to link the two sets of works. Initially, we see nothing but a starting point for five lines depicting the beginning of a system of coordinates. Three coordinates could fix the environment of our everyday experiences, at any rate, in the convention of the perspective whose manifold use has promised us, since the invention of photography at the latest, a plausible illustration of reality through the camera lens.

Five lines have their starting point in the same place and there is no reason not to imagine the multidimensional spaces of mathematics illustrated in this way. At least, additional qualities become visible, bringing to mind the coordinates not directly portrayed. The iridescent colors, traces of brushstrokes that, upon closer inspection, stop being lines and become sophisticated expanses of color, could be one of these elements. This makes us realize that our perception of the drawings also has something to do with our distance from the physical presence of the work that we are looking at. As a photographic illustration or as a reproduction in a catalogue, our overall sensual impression is generally the same as that from a distance, for example, upon entering a room where drawings by Bächli are hanging. At least, this is how the writer himself felt when he was able to compare the photos of the

room that had been electronically transmitted to him in advance with his impression on entering the studio: yes, that is exactly how they were, the drawings that comprised a fascinating grid expanse. The rigorous selection process to which Bächli submits her work means that even when viewed from close up, every drawing boasts that sophistication and precision that characterizes the entire installation. The individual drawings differ, as much in their uniqueness and ambiguity, as in the way that they represent picture elements in an overall impression. As the coordinates in a spatial structure they provide an extended drawing dimension: formal, material, substantive. The line drawn by the brush always takes on volume and substance and is, by its very nature, a sculpture, as soon as its colored matter and the slightly wavy paper in the intended space bulge out as abstract shapes into a world seen three-dimensionally. A graphic artist in three dimensions: we might also come across Silvia Bächli as a sculptor.

A three-dimensional, sculptural, sequential view of drawing? Bächli represents unseen spaces, because we will never be able to definitively place the individual drawings, either as individual depictions or in terms of a sequence within the whole. The works can be precisely described, even in detail, and yet always reference the next one, one that they do not in fact illustrate. Two drawings perhaps indicate something in common, that then references something else, three drawings can possibly be interpreted as a time sequence etc. To this extent, referring to the example of Donald Judd may be symptomatic. With Bächli, it is the empty spaces and what is left out, namely the shifts and progressions, which obey more complex models of illustration. This makes her drawings unique both in their openness and in their precision. Thus, her drawing always reflects the conditions and conventions of its genesis. In this way the artist is able to swim free and to develop that seismograph of a present that includes its absence and unattainability in the decisiveness of a search for a symbol of its meaning. Granting this kind of contradiction pictorial dimensions can be wonderfully reconciled with the premises of modern philosophy. If people are willing to try. Here, primacy should entirely be given to the drawings of Silvia Bächli, to their perception.