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Colour in the milieu of emptiness

There is painting of things contemplated and there is painting as contemplation. The former was the accepted norm from the 15th century until the arrival of modernism. Antithetically, modernism asserted painting as contemplation, meaning that painting no longer presented a specific way of seeing but rendered its own being in object form. What mattered was no longer a motif or genre, but the medium itself in its inherent meaningfulness. The ideas of redemption in the concepts and strategies remained attached to the gravity of the old as long as they were combating the old. Postmodernism showed that certain of these premises no longer possessed meaning.

For painting today, this has resulted in a new consensus – that of a dehistoricized overall perspective that includes all that has gone before and all that is yet to come as possibility. Which is boring. Not least because nothing matters anymore. Artists no longer stand for directions, but for market segments. Which is exciting, because it makes viewers responsible for their judgements again. They have a right to choose what they like, for whatever reason. And the same applies for painters.

One of the few artists to have grasped this is Thorsten Zwinger. From the outset, he took his lack of illusions as the basis of his work. He wouldn't state it in such concise terms, but he has a boundless horror of what would once have been the beautiful cloth, a tastefully rendered knee or an atmospheric scene, not to mention subtle colour field concepts. What might occupy the eye, he photographs – from the TV – and fixes these surrogates as stamp-sized prints onto ordinary roofing laths. In this way, they add up to the blurred film of a dream or memory, including the memory of traditional painting: portrait, still life, landscape, broken into the pictorial form of something prefabricated.

When he paints, he switches off any such will to an objective. Paint, but no painting. Nowhere intentions in the foreground. Planes, cold, under or over sweeps that make lines without signifying. They carry colours into a milieu of emptiness. Depthless, diaphanous, a state of transparency, of the void, of floating, that could also be read as expansive, if only it didn't remain enslaved to canvas and stretcher in order to count as painting.

Whatever. Zwinger leaves it like that, laying a shimmer over the void in order to arrive at something that could be called The Least. Tipping into blue, into magenta, into a peach-coloured gesture that courts a thought. But the thought won't be courted. The glassy, glacial quality of the ground forms a repellent surface, creating the distance required to generate a counter-impulse – even if it is the appeal of frost or revulsion. Such clarity also possesses a disarming innocence and tenderness – disarming even concepts.

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