

DUBINSKYFINEARTS

THOU SHALT NOT MAKE UNTO THEE ANY GRAVEN IMAGE

Djawid C. Borower is a “pictor doctus”. But this does not in any way contradict his pure pleasure in creating and in looking. The very fact that he’s a learned painter makes the pictures he creates for himself and for the viewer so full of sensuality and presence. They don’t pretend to any kind of spontaneity. They are wholly undisguised results of a merging of precision and playfulness, of calculation and color. They merely flirt with the predictability that seems to be inherent in the serial: they are truly seductive because they neither begin nor end with their seeming physical boundaries in space.

At first these pictures summon the viewer to lose himself in their surfaces, which seem to act as veils rather than giving any immediate access or insight into what lies beneath. Underneath these skins one sees faces whose anonymity the viewer is tempted to uncover, to try to break through. Any attempt at this is bound to fail, however – the likenesses insist on remaining unknowable, they continually entice the viewer to contemplate them anew. The fragments of text that are fused into the portraits, letters released from their signification, delegate any attribution of meaning to the viewer. They are simply beautiful characters floating through the image.

The programmatic serial character of “Pictures of Poems” underlines the enigmatic push and pull of each individual work. At first the repetition of the – inevitably never identical – representations of basically the same theme does

not serve to shed any light on the mystery. The meaning of the text remains a riddle, flows into the ambiguity of the pictorial ornamentation.

The pictures thus become readable in terms of their esthetic power field; their conceptual foundation fuses with their powerful appeal. One has to – and, above all, one wants to – look at them again and again. Their allure never wanes.

LOOKING AT LANGUAGE

Djawid C. Borower speaks with Rose-Maria Gropp. Excerpt from an Interview, September 2002

GROPP:

Your work is oriented around specific thematic constellations. You have done cycles on money, on God, on time and now on language. What connects these cycles with one another?

BOROWER:

First of all, there’s the very fact that I work in thematic cycles. I’m interested in certain contents and their formal realization. How do I translate the theme of money into painting? How do I find a visual language for time as a state of consciousness? I find the “GOD” series interesting because of the biblical prohibition of representational imagery at the root of any visualization of this concept – a ban that, in the final analysis, is still imposed again and again on modern art today.

GROPP:

Let's talk for a moment about your first major cycle, money, including your "Portraits of Money" and "Pictures of Money". Where exactly did your interests lie when you created this cycle?

BOROWER

When I paint the portrait on a bank note I'm not portraying a person, but just painting a section of a bank note. The same goes for a landscape or a word. I'm producing the representation of a representation. But, by its very materiality, a copy in oil on canvas still suggests more originality than the original itself. The decisive factor for me, though, was that on a bank note I found abstraction next to figuration, the number and the text together with ornamentation.

GROPP:

... that is, exactly those elements that link your cycles together in terms of form.

BOROWER

Yes, I find it interesting to work both conceptually and according to painterly considerations. And I keep rediscovering this interest in myself again and again.

GROPP

The conceptual and painterly proportions are weighted differently from cycle to cycle. While in your works dealing with time the conceptual factor dominates, your two portrait series – the one about money and the one devoted to language – have strong painterly tendencies.

BOROWER

That's right. For me, every theme demands its own approach and its own formal means. That's what makes thematic work so fascinating. The challenges are always different. Beyond that, though, I believe that there's no such thing as a purely conceptual approach, just as pure painting is also a chimera. The sheer fact of painting during a time when paint-

ing is again and again being denied its right to exist is in itself a conceptual act. Why paint? Why paint like you do and not differently? And with the huge variety of working methods to choose from today, the decision either for or against a medium is always a conceptual act. On the other hand, the concept always needs to be "materialized" in order to be received as an artwork, even if it's only to put it on paper. Kant's formulation is apt here: Percepts without concepts are blind and concepts without percepts are empty.

GROPP

One of the most important artists who worked both conceptually and with a painterly focus was Jasper Johns. Did his work influence you?

BOROWER

Strangely enough, I'm not influenced at all by Jasper Johns, who without doubt was and is a crucial figure, but rather much more by the Fauvists, by their fondness for strong colors and for dissolving the picture into fields of color. And, naturally, by Matisse. I'm sure this predilection comes from the fact that, biographically, I come more from the "concept" side, so to speak -- namely from writing.

GROPP

You studied philosophy and history, working for the "Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung" both during and after your studies. You have also written plays for both the theater and radio.

BOROWER

One of the biggest challenges in writing is to make language descriptive and alive, to convey emotionality in words. The author works hard at depicting the nuances in a thought and giving it color, but is limited by his medium. The conceptual artist is instead prone to the opposite, has a tendency toward reduction. For this reason it was more enriching for me to first

concentrate on a pronounced kind of painting. It was only then that the concept came to the fore again, and language along with it.

GROPP

Your first conceptual pictures were worked in a series. Similarly to the current portrait series, you showed identical motifs from various perspectives. When did language begin to flow into your pictures?

BOROWER

With "Pictures of Money". For a long time I dealt with the problem of how language becomes painting instead of staying language that has merely moved from paper onto canvas. I didn't want to just write something on the painting, as a second layer, but to write something into the painting, to make language an integral component of the painting. In the money series I found a theme for myself in which language and numbers already have a formal relationship with subjects that are traditionally associated with painting.

GROPP

In my opinion the smeared sections of your pictures are an important means of incorporating language into the painting. Contours are dissolved. The color with which you paint the text merges both materially and visually with the surroundings.

BOROWER

That's right. Smearing integrates. It is central. It is the most painterly, most intuitive aspect of the work. It is an act of pure painting. With a single gesture, paint that was painstakingly applied is smeared. It is a ritual act, which fundamentally changes the picture. It brings the concept to life, so to speak. It gives it an emotional charge.

GROPP

Since the smearing effect is different in every picture, it makes each motif within a series into a different picture.

BOROWER

The motifs each become a different picture through smearing and, above all, through the writing as well. I write a text and spread it over a series of portraits. This sets the individual pictures into a sequence. A different fragment of the text is inscribed into each portrait. Each picture then has its own expression and character. The writing intervenes formally and from a painterly perspective, and, together with the smearing, it creates a variation on the theme.

GROPP

With this method, however, the actual function of language is lost, at least in "Pictures of Poems". Its meaning can no longer be grasped, at best only fragments of meaning.

BOROWER

I deliberately chose the poem as text genre. Because a poem is already a fragment of meaning. A poem does not explain anything, it is open, it demands interpretation. Even if you were to line up the portraits side by side and look at the whole text, you would still have nothing more than a bigger meaning fragment. In each individual picture you can only read single words or parts of words. The writing even tends to be reduced to mere form and color. It is sometimes still recognizable, but it is also pictorially concrete. The written character is sensualized. It has undergone a painterly materialization. Language becomes imagery: language is looked at.

GROPP

But there are also pictures in which the language remains readable: "Picture of Time. This Moment" for example.

BOROWER

In this case language has two levels: a concrete, material level and a representative one. The characters refer to themselves and also to a content. The viewer receives multiple input here: the time; a short text, which might be a commentary or an inner monologue; part of a larger text and a portrait – and therefore once again fragments of meaning that he himself can place in context. They create a space for associations, in which the viewer can extract a meaning or read a meaning into the work – if he wants to. I call this associative space, which is formed by text and image, a “language image”.

by Rose-Maria Gropp

Rose-Maria Gropp is an editor of the Arts & Entertainment Section (Feuilleton) of the “Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung”, in charge of reporting on the art market.