

The Melancholy Cheerfulness of Being

Already left for dead so many times, painting is currently – once again – very much alive and kicking. Of course, there are déjà vue effects and certainly young artists who either unconcernedly or insolently lay claim to the invention of the wheel. On the other hand, in the wide spectrum of contemporary painting it is impossible to overlook conscious or subconscious reflection on art history, on a charged and often burdensome tradition that cannot be shaken off. Everything is possible and everything has been there once before, but even in simple mathematical terms, the chances of creating a new constellation when the kaleidoscope is shaken are de facto inexhaustible.

Not every variant is worth seeing. However, quite independent of individual nuances and a work's positioning within, at the centre, on the edge, or even outside of the mainstream, it is remarkable that the apparently long familiar, reappearing in cycles – if in different forms – usually proves unmistakably contemporary upon close observation.

But what constitutes this specifically contemporary quality? Unfortunately, with the post-modern “arbitrariness” of “anything goes”, it is impossible to pin it down; every defining restriction or exclusion is overtaken by reality almost as soon as it is made. Nonetheless, an attempt will now be made to specify at least some criteria. Let us begin with a brief look back - necessarily simplified.

Modernism broke with the mimetic composition of the painting as a “window” or “stage”. The painting sui generis became autonomous, an object-like reality. This new understanding was realised most clearly in collage. It was now possible to combine images and fragments of images, texts, but also materials of different origins and qualities. A new, complex reality emerged from fragments of reality. The picture left its frame, mixing with its surroundings while simultaneously distinguishing itself from them.

For the artificiality of all this was as obvious as the origin of the components from everyday reality. This – the “madness” of the parts – led to a tension that was paradoxically intensified when the picture withdrew into its familiar frame once again; when it made a show of conventionality; when it was even composed with a central perspective and thus suggested that the depiction was actually possible outside the image. As if everything was the way that it always had been; “normal” and in order. The latter is the principle of Surrealism – we know it from our dreams.

But it is also possible for coincidence to actually bring things together in such a way that they appear extremely alien, astonishing, irritating or absurd. Then all that is necessary is their discovery, and a suitable procedure by which to capture what has happened - for instance with the aid of photography.

Or of painting. In a highly-skilled and frequently hair-raising way, new painting juggles with a wide range of possibilities and stylistic means. It pretends to be Impressionist

and Expressionist; not “either or”, but both. It borrows unashamedly from the Surrealists, makes use of the automatism of Action Painting, includes or even tangibly exudes the processual, and it employs photography and the computer in the arrangement of the whole.

Breaches of style become quite consciously staged stylistic means. Genres, styles, forms, motifs, materials and techniques all serve, without distinction, as a register furthering the colourful spectrum of this visual symphony. The result of such playfulness is often a more or less hybrid, shrill mixtum compositum, a garish cocktail emerging from the sorcerer’s kitchen of contemporary art. Here formal unity - still retained despite the complexity of earlier generations’ work - is abolished with obvious intent, in favour of a bizarre and often painfully dissonant “clash of cultures”.

Of course, there are some quite different works. But for one thing, exceptions prove the rule, as we know, and besides, minimalist tendencies also have their place in the recipe book of current picture “cooks”. Quotations are certainly made, not only from art history, but also from the entire store of the chaotic, brightly-coloured, real-virtual world of images that surrounds us daily and is no more than a huge collage itself.

Contemplating the works of Sen Chung before this background, he cannot be counted among the shrill representatives of the trend outlined here. In fact, his works are quite soothing, although they are

produced according to the “recipe” described – something that becomes most obvious in the case of his impressive wall designs.

The choice of setting - a purposeful reference to architecture and environment - is the starting point and a component of these installation-like, usually temporary, but conceivably permanent works, which the artist paints directly onto the wall. He also uses polystyrene elements to elevate sections of his already collage-like pictures, composed from a wide range of fragments, and decorates them with luminous, expressive forms made from different coloured neon strips and colourful, twinkling chains of party lights. Reflections and citations of primary and mediated reality are mixed, together with things seen and recalled, dreamt and longed for, with drawing and painting, art and kitsch – true to the Pop motto “everything is pretty”.

But the paintings are far from overloaded. Horror vacui is alien to Sen Chung’s painting: quite the contrary, his work is characterised by a truly economical use of the artistic means. In his single paintings, the collage principle is used more sparingly, and often the effect of collage emerges only through the arrangement of several paintings in relation to one another within a room. Chung sets contrasts in a quiet, laconic way. Images sometimes overlap, but only in passing, and sometimes almost imperceptibly. One ornament covers the whole scene; small mischievous interventions disturb or destroy the integrity of the apparently plausible events. These

bring the viewer back from illusion into reality, into the reality of the picture and its surface.

An irritating friction develops between the depiction of reality and the reality of the depiction. Seeing a bright yellow cone of light isolated in the night-time, the viewer may choose whether he experiences the painting as a detective story or as a work of Concrete Art. Images appear within the image – but only for a fleeting moment. The more recent works are frequently restricted to a single motif. Its intensity is generated by its own transitory-fragmentary character rather than by confrontation with other motifs.

Chung's motifs may seem banal, coincidental, interchangeable and unpretentious. Scraps of memory appear and disappear, everything is in motion, *panta rhei*, nothing is complete, and everything is no more than a section, a film still, a snapshot taken from larger, intangible contexts. Whatever is visible does not reveal the significance of the motifs, but the viewer is stimulated to investigate the before and after, the where from and where to of this fictive, yet quite everyday story.

The works are often based on photographs - ones Chung has taken himself or found - and the motifs themselves are frequently connected with motion or mobility in some way: landscapes pass by, seen fleetingly from a car or a train, an aeroplane takes off, a figure can be seen at the edge of the painting, just about to leave the frame. Returning in a new way to the understanding of the painting as a "window" mentioned at the outset, Chung's art reflects his generation's feel for life. It is shaped by a constant, real or virtual state of motion and by virtual omnipresence, perhaps consolidated by the artist's own biographical commuting between cultures and continents. Occasionally, reminiscences of his home country and its traditions do come into play, but this is also somewhat fleeting, *en passant*, memories of images rather than an experienced reality.

Sen Chung's works are images of *vanitas*, reflecting on the transience of the moment; romantic, melancholy, but by no means dismal. They point to a lightness of being without pathos, and yet they are far from superficial. Cheerfulness and melancholy are balanced within them like yin and yang – the European viewer finds himself repeatedly searching for traces of the „exotic“. But perhaps the way in which the apparently spontaneously produced motifs of this art are actually placed with such precision, the way the apparent fleetingness of the loose brushstrokes proves to be sensitively calculated and perfectly executed – perhaps these qualities are indeed rooted in a culture which values the modest and the everyday, but also reveres the presence of the past, the possible union of opposites, and precise craftsmanship.

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