

Ines Goldbach
in Conversation with
Markus Amm

"When this observation completes a picture...
time no longer plays any part."

Ines Goldbach

Looking at your paintings, the first impression is that a lot of material seems to have been used. The 'boards', as you call them, have 20 to 30 layers of gesso applied to the canvas. They serve as a perfect, flat image ground, and are the pre-condition of any further steps. And then, in turn, you apply colour layers to them. These are wafer-thin. The colours are generally poured onto the ground, rather than painted, and intermingle dramatically or subtly. Depending on the light that falls on them—whether it is natural or artificial—the colour surfaces thus generated change, as does the impression of an image's depth that you created through that process of application. All that said, I would like to talk to you about time, planning and accident, as well as about aspects of reality such as space and light in relation to your paintings, not to mention your earlier installation and photography works, as I think all these facets are key to your work.

So let's start directly with your new paintings. I've just tried to briefly explain the (technical) process of how your painting is created. One part—the production of the image ground—is certainly something you can plan easily, almost 'process'. That relates to the choice of format, oil colour, gesso layers, etc. On my last studio visit you mentioned that to a degree you produce many 'boards' concurrently because the production is so labour intensive. The moment in which you apply colour, however, is different. What role does accident, or the step you cannot plan, play for you here, the moment in which things are created and reveal themselves, yet which also contains a moment of failure and rejection of what exists?

Markus Amm

The preparation consists of making notes about various colours, shades and combinations. At the start of the painting process I still stick fairly close to that: the first couple of layers generally follow the planned specifications. It's worth mentioning though, if this is to be understood precisely, that there are about two or three weeks of drying between each application of paint. So in order to make any progress at all there are always around 20 or 30 paintings in the studio that I'm working on at the same time. When the first paint applications have dried through it slowly begins to become

more fragile, but at the same time freer. The closer to the end, the riskier the whole painting process becomes. If I make a mistake on the fourth or fifth layer of oil paint, or if the paint dries out incorrectly, I can actually start again from the beginning. That means removing the old layers and starting afresh. The old application of colour remains on the sides, however, and through this you can almost read the vain previous attempts in every painting, or these become a part of a new picture through their remnants.

The actual painting process is therefore very short, but protracted, because of the technique and the care with which form and colour are chosen. It can be that I simply leave the picture hanging in the studio for months without daring to paint further right before I apply the last layer, in so doing incurring the risk of destroying months-worth of work. This very time of not actively painting, during which you only observe the picture, is the most important part of the process. It is the moment in which you are most engaged with it, grappling too with the most significant doubts. The finished picture, if it is as anticipated—or, by chance, even better—is immediately apparent and my observation switches to a contemplative mode. Then in truth I would rather not give the picture away, or I hold onto it as long as possible for myself in the studio. When this observation completes a picture, so to speak, time no longer plays any part.

Ines Goldbach

You are describing something essential here. Can terms like freedom describe this contemplative process? Freedom in the sense that one can achieve a moment of presence by virtue of activating one's own ability to see? One is suddenly in a position to achieve an instant of intensity which requires very little else. Perhaps exhibition makers should be concerned most of all about creating situations in which there is enough time and space for these sorts of moments.

Markus Amm

Freedom in quotations marks, yes, perhaps. Sometimes a quiet obsession develops from this too. I take it that most artists know this state in which you are almost intoxicated by your own work. For want of a better word, freedom is then the best description. Of course an institution would be challenged to offer the time and the intimacy that an artist has to observe and evaluate a work in their studio, but with art—and painting particularly—this is not necessarily required.

Time is relative when observing art. It can happen in a second or all day long.

Ines Goldbach

Many of your works do rapidly leave your studio, to travel for a long time or they are sold. How does experience with your work flow into the newest works at any given time, viewed in relation to the factor of time? Do you see all your work as one artistic process, in this sense, in which certain things, the questions you pose etc., are always carried forward?

Markus Amm

Yes, as much as I would always like a new beginning and as much as each new picture is truly a surprise to start with, after a certain time it can be recognised as the result of a series. Probably more so for the viewer than for me. I'm always jumping around within a pictorial vocabulary that has been developing since the 1990s. The individual work series on which I've been working since then are separated by different media—collage, abstract photography, drawing, painting, etc.—as well as by pauses which sometimes last years. My galleries often point out works which I gave them 10 or 15 years ago and which only now make sense to them—now they can place them in a series. Prior to that they have been lying in drawers as single pieces that couldn't easily be categorised and were all but forgotten there.

Ines Goldbach

Just now you described the moment of artistic creation or artistic process very specifically, between activity and apparent, or maybe active, passivity. And also the instant of deciding whether a work has to be taken further or not, whether it is finished or not. It reminds me a little of a quotation from the American painter Robert Ryman, who once said in an interview that 'a painting is a miracle'. With this he meant that his painting first and foremost had the power to surprise him as an artist as soon as he saw and could experience it installed on the wall in a space. Only then did he see what was extraordinary, the full potential of his own work. The way you describe it, your own works often seem to surprise you as well—between planning and accident or allowing to happen. This seems also to explain your interest in work series: applying the same format and the same technique, so to speak, each time, yet something new always results from it, right?

Markus Amm

I can only confirm Robert Ryman's statement. With his work in particular the spatial relationships are naturally decisive, more so than for most other painters probably. The tones of his painting are communicated and paradoxically no larger than in polychromatic pictures, but the reduction of his colour palette naturally makes the exhibition space part of the image in an extreme way. The smallest changes in light conditions shift everything, make everything volatile; this means that the picture only finds the situation in which it begins to take effect in the moment of exhibition. This is how I see the 'material' meaning of Robert Ryman's words. If I apply the question to myself, I must agree. Installing pictures is a decisive part of my work. I try to develop an abstract narrative in the sequence and in the various viewing lines that emerge. The space, the light, the gaps and the likely direction of movement define the flow of images. It is the case, unfortunately, that you cannot observe your own exhibitions in galleries and museums as long or as intensively as you can individual pictures in the studio. There the encounter lasts for years, and, like I said, I love it. Nevertheless, the best place in which art can be seen is a public one. For the artist, as it brings an end, at least provisionally, to your ability to interfere with the work—which can become torture—as well as for the public, which can then embrace the 'miracle' in whatever way they will.

Ines Goldbach

For you as an artist, what makes a good exhibition?

Markus Amm

A good gallery or museum exhibition enables an entirely fresh space for renewed observation. The possibilities a good spatial situation can generate make many facets of a work visible for the first time, and, in the end, it's also about public space. Because besides observation, discussion of painting is the feature which transcends the coloured surfaces of artworks.

Ines Goldbach

At this moment while we talk we are sitting in front of two of your pictures. As you've just mentioned the colour field, I'd like to pick up on thoughts of abstraction and figuration—because looking at these paintings triggers a mixture of both. Figuration which can never be grasped unambiguously. Sometimes you ask yourself if it doesn't rather relate to a reflex to think you see something figurative in abstraction and develop a perception from that. Just as looking at your

pictures there's a continual switch between a strong sense of something spatial and their volatility at the same time. Are these elements that you evoke during the painting process, do you deliberately activate them perhaps?

Markus Amm

Yes, I work consciously with these liaisons, although that often would not even be required, because—as you've mentioned—it's an almost inevitable reflex to generate those interrelations. With that I mean abstraction–figuration as well as space–surface. For me these are different perspectives, in the sense of communication, with which you can approach the picture. It's possible to find an anthropomorphic way in, but then very quickly to only see surfaces and colours, which all of a sudden start to produce a spatial image again. You can also see the connections that arise as a method of questioning given contexts.

Ines Goldbach

You previously showed me a number of earlier works. These are photographs, and I'm astonished how like your paintings they are, both in terms of content and formally, as well as regarding this aspect of figuration and abstraction we just discussed. These black and white photographs appear very painterly. Because, just like you allow oil paint to flow over your image grounds today, you poured chemical liquids over partially crushed photo paper for the photographs and then allowed yourself to be surprised by the result in the dark-room, by the slow development and appearance of the visible. Maybe this is why they seem to me to come so close to the production of your paintings.

Markus Amm

The chemograms were about creating a two-dimensional image of a spatial object. I folded the unexposed photo paper into three-dimensional objects and then put them into the developer, before removing them again immediately. The developer liquid then gathered along the folds and curves of the paper accordingly, to be exposed and fixed shortly after. Afterwards the photo paper was placed in a press in order to be returned to its original two-dimensional state. So the goal was a two-dimensional representation of a three-dimensional object. It is indeed a working method that plays with chance, in which you can never know exactly how the result will look. You have a general idea of what is emerging, but never full control.

The moment in which the photo paper is exposed is too short to really see the developing happening or to be able to influence it further. And under the red light afterwards you don't recognise any key details. The real judgement happens only after the image is fixed or pressed. This is also the case with painting. When I pour or smooth the colours over the painting ground or apply them with a brush they are considerably thinned. There are very strong reflections on the relatively impenetrable image surface due to the thinning of the paint, and the intermingling of the different image levels or colours cannot be entirely controlled. The image appears through a process of time, like the photographs. In photography, you call that the developing time. You see how an image emerges on photo paper, and the results of painting can sometimes be just as surprising as the result of an abstract photograph.

Ines Goldbach

To what extent do the technicalities play a fundamental part in how what you want to show emerges?

Markus Amm

Without wanting to go too far into things like pigment concentration, weight, oil or binding agent content, which are sometimes impenetrable even to me, you can see that the interrelation of the elements is too complex to have complete control over it, particularly as I mix the colours intuitively, not analytically. Sometimes—if it is still damp—a layer of paint further down settles over the layer of paint applied afterwards because of a lighter pigment or a higher oil content; this is how the particular process that I work with in my pictures takes place. In this sense I recognise a similarity between the photographic and the painted pictures. The picture appears within a time frame. For chemograms it is a few minutes, for paintings several hours. Chance has been reckoned with in each case or is desired as a moment in which an image is generated.

Ines Goldbach

Some photographs are framed and gain an additional layer thanks to the glass surface on which the space is reflected. As far as I can see, you don't choose this secondary level just for protection, but rather as a means of generating additional spatial depth insofar as the reflected space is brought into the photograph's surface. Is this impression correct?

Markus Amm

I chose to have the black photographic works mounted behind glass for some installations in order to indicate the exhibition space, to hold onto it in the photograph, metaphorically speaking. This is large-format black exposed photo paper. Through the linkage of the black photograph under the reflective glass surface of the frame you get the impression of seeing a dark photograph of the surrounding space and the works exhibited within it. Sometimes I have also hung these works on opposite corners of a space so that they reflect each other infinitely—as a reflection, a contemplation of the exhibition space as such, let's say.

Ines Goldbach

Would you say that these thoughts about exhibition space are also contained in your new works? Already here in your studio I sense how your paintings have the capacity to incorporate the space that surrounds them, with all of its qualities such as the natural and artificial light and its transformation as time passes. This may be because you don't frame them and in that way you don't cut them off from the surrounding wall. I can also imagine that a label would break the transition from work to wall. Are these considerations that matter to you?

Markus Amm

For some time these reflections have taken place rather more passively. In older installations I could still work through such discourse concretely. Now, however, the content is concentrated directly on the abstract image. Of course painting, movement, light, space and personal sensitivities etc. all work closely together, but beyond the fact that they do, I find it difficult to define the meaning of this in detail. I am, after all, mostly searching and the artist's interpretation of their own work is possibly not the best method of understanding what takes place 'under the bonnet'. But some interaction with the factors you mentioned and how our perception changes through them is certainly intended.

For the gesso boards the side edges are an integral element of the picture. They correspond to the image surface and are, more specifically, its genealogy, in which you can follow the colours and sequences, erasures and new beginnings. Beyond the fact that a frame would cut the picture off from the space and isolate it, it would also cover the sides of the image surface and omit an important aspect of the work.

Ines Goldbach

It seems logical that for some time you made your focus the physical exhibition space as such, with installative works including major spatial interventions. To name one example: in one exhibition, you put stripes on all four corners of the space in spray paint so it appeared as if large bands of tape had been applied. One was reminded of the kind of spatial model that some artists construct in order to have a better image of the concrete space. You also turn conventional museum barriers into spatial sculptures, no longer upright, but writing lines in space. Considering your current painting, you almost get the impression that the formulation and activation of space that you undertook in earlier works has now been incorporated in the image surface and how it generates space. On the other hand the materiality of the paintings, how they sit on walls as boards, means they relate enormously to their actual surroundings and stand their ground there in relation to the walls and space. Do you see this connection between earlier and current work yourself?

Markus Amm

Yes, definitely. The engagement with space is continued in my current works. In fact those earlier works you mentioned were created in conjunction with the gesso boards on which I now principally work. The large-scale grey paintings, with the barriers, the wall works and the photographic works all dealt directly with the question of which different architectural, economic and social functions defined an exhibition space. The small format boards, which sometimes were shown together with the works just mentioned, are, in contrast, about opening a fictitious space. As you can ascertain by looking at these images, a singular spatial effect is created by the means in which they are painted. You can fall so quickly into the depth of the picture, just as you can find yourself thrown out of it once again. What you see is never unambiguous, and ultimately it can only be inadequately described. It's a game with the viewer's perception and with their willingness to engage with the work. What they draw out of the painting naturally comes back into real space and effects their perception of that space. In this sense the painting activates an interdependency between the space and the viewer, without, however, giving up its autonomy.

Ines Goldbach

In relation to that, for me the question arises of what an exhibition of your works means to you. You hinted at it a little earlier: it's a possibility to experience the pictures over the course of time, as well as under light conditions and in constellations that are new for you. I mean that how the actual space, architecture and your paintings chime together, in particular arrangements and with particular intervals, rhythms and light conditions, create not just an exhibition but also a situation. Like an echo chamber, this situation can be filled with something that seems somewhat to elude language. Maybe it could best be described with the term of the activated field.

Markus Amm

As much as I can immerse myself in individual pictures in my studio, exhibitions are really the goal I am working towards. In the studio everything is in a state of potentiality. Right up until the last moment everything can still be rejected or changed—from individual pictures to the selection of works that I show. Installation is accordingly an extremely intensive process, also given the timeframe. Then the paintings shown have to interact with each other as well as with their spatial situation. Only once that works is the exhibition a success for me. In group shows, in which often enough situations occur which are dissatisfactory to the artist due to existing practical constraints, you learn that the effect of works can be weakened. In the best case, however, when the installation works and an exhibition produces one overall picture, an additional element and additional qualities emerge which you could never achieve when looking at a single picture in the studio, for example. For me personally these swift, transient, euphoric moments are what gives me the greatest satisfaction from my work—and these are also the most inspiring moments—which make me want to go straight back into the studio. Paradoxically, just after an unsuccessful exhibition—and not only my own—is when what is yet to be done becomes clearest.