

Painting on the Stage, or Christian Achenbach's Box of Magic Tricks

On motif and musicality, and the relationship of time and space in the art of Christian Achenbach

Acapulco is located in the Pacific Ocean, in Mexico. Where, though, is Acapulco? Upon entering the SEXAUER exhibition hall, our view is immediately blocked by a wall running across the hall. On it, there is a picture. In it, a door, almost as if it was left by an explosion. This picture thus actually releases the view again that it originally concealed. If we imagine stepping through this door or if we actually walk around the wall, we will see another picture. It almost fills up the wall with its two and a half by four metres. Again, it draws our eyes to supposed spaces behind the picture. When we go around this wall we can see a picture with a landscape and an architectural space at once. It remains unclear whether the picture shows a view from a room outside or into a room from the outside. We can see trees, open doors, passages and a floor, which partially also seems open to the bottom. In addition to that, there are colour fields and colour strikes, some static, some applied powerfully and dynamically. Nothing seems to be certain here. We can see inside and outside at once, nature and architecture, organic and geometric shapes, an oscillating space that puts into question our own location and point of view and adds insecurity. What we see is Acapulco.

Space as motif

The large picture, which shares its title with the exhibition, shows many characteristics of the paintings by Christian Achenbach. The concurrent and overlapping existence of geometric shapes and symbolic painting, confident and relaxed references to the last century's modern art, fluctuation between the static and dynamic, and not least the means and effects of digital image processing, transferred to painting.

Achenbach himself says about his painting that the motif wasn't important in the end. Rather, he wanted to provide a stage to painting. In this respect, Acapulco is an overture and stage combined; the overture for the exhibition and the stage for painting. In Acapulco, Achenbach consequentially does not use a classic motif. He turns the room into it. Because this room is not stable, but broken multiple times, the viewer is forced to watch himself trying to find something to hold onto; looking for stability in an image space that makes a site we yearn for appear before our inner eye because of its phonetic similarity to Acapulco, but that will not keep its promise. This loss is a gain. We lose ourselves in painting as such.

The banality of good

In another picture, Galactika, we are looking at a clearly identifiable motif, in contrast to Acapulco. Since, according to Achenbach, the subject of the picture is not decisive and, as he says, is replaceable, he picked a perfectly mundane object for this work: bicyclists. But it is the things Achenbach does with them! He turns them into a futuristic eddy of colour with Op Art elements. The head of a snowman with a dented, black cylinder protrudes from the green-blue veil of speed, as does a girl with a red hat with a ribbon and bow, along with front headlights, frame and tyres. There seem to be the blurry outlines of a motorcycle helmet, and a green mole in front of the girl in the red hat. What a company on the road there! Achenbach underestimates his own choice of motif. It is true that the motifs are not decisive in the end because the magic of colour, the interaction of geometry and gesture, control and chance, is merely about painting as such – but the figurative fragments and details that add stability to the mind (looking for pictures), are full of wit and a casual-ironic freshness, a relaxed parody-like attitude, filling the thrilling "pure" painting with nothing less than humanity. If we wrongly call this banal, it's the banality of good.

The humble means of figurative fragments and elements forming the realm of the mundane is more important than could be initially assumed. After all, the picture is inspired by futurism. It is a little reminiscent of Giacomo Balla and Gino Severini. In contrast to some futurist art, the ironic breaks in Achenbach's pictures do not suggest, however, that they, with their speed locked in colour, could ever be abused by forces that focus only on meaningless acceleration. It is futurism without any fascist potential.

Quote und humanity

When mentioning futurism, we also need to mention another characteristic of Christian Achenbach's art: his sovereign play with genres, styles and historic patterns. This play is neither lecturing nor a means to its own end in Achenbach's work. Rather, it is literally used for never-ending fun. It simply gives joy to discover the historic ingredients in Achenbach's pictures. Achenbach himself speaks of his "box of magic tricks". Beyond the fun (which should not be underestimated), however, the references and quotes have a deeper sense as well. Since painting as such is important to Achenbach and he wants to give it a stage,

according to his words, the historic fragments are an integrated part of his work. If you paint painting, you can't get around history. If you reflect on painting, you have to know its paths and where it comes from. And thus, all the "isms" are allowed to play their own little roles on the great stage of Achenbach's painting: Suprematism, Cubism and Surrealism, Pop Art and Op Art, Constructivism and Expressionism. The good thing about this is that the different styles never appear as "isms" in Achenbach's work. They do not insist on their importance and they do not claim to be the one true style, as they did a hundred years ago when they were born in the last modernism. And so Achenbach lets modernism truly find itself. It's postmodernism in the very best sense: a matter-of-course modernism and liberality, shot through, not endangered, playful and relaxed. This also makes these pictures so very human, in addition to the figurative elements already mentioned with the twinkles in their eyes.

Music as an element of time

There is something else that we have to think about when we are looking at Achenbach's work: space and time, and, as a consequence, their musicality. We have already mentioned the image space of Acupalco. Achenbach's work goes beyond examination of space. In addition to space, time determines our perception of reality, permitting changes and movement together with space. Without (the perception of) space and time, there is no movement and no change. No one has explained this as well in the last century as Schopenhauer and, as a humble successor, Thomas Mann's average man Hans Castorp in his nightly analyses in the Sanatorium Berghof. And here – in the question about space and time – painting works with a double illusion. Even though it takes place on the canvas, and thus (except for the layer of paint) in a two-dimensional space, it shows us three-dimensional spaces. Although the painted canvas does not change, it shows us changes, it shows us movement through space.

In the Middle Ages, there were the first attempts to lock the narrative succession of reality, history and thus change on the unchanging canvas. In the Middle Ages, however, it was only "stations" of a story, e.g. of a saint. Stations, though, as the word says, are static. They do not move. Half a millennium later, people went beyond this, trying to illustrate movement as such. Let us remember Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase*, or Balla's *A Young Girl Running on a Balcony*, both created a little more than a century ago. There were mostly two ladies who put art history into motion. Achenbach frequently quotes both of them in his work. Now, we need to return to the motifs in his pictures again – even though he would probably object. As already mentioned, he considers the motif to be of secondary importance. "A good picture does not depend on its motif." This is undoubtedly true. Luckily, there also is no hierarchy of painting styles, as there was in the 17th century. Still, I believe that the chosen motif is no coincidence. Here, we need to deal with the musicality and the picture subjects from the musical world in Achenbach's work.

Since his early days as a painter, Achenbach has been choosing musical motifs for his paintings: punk and jazz bands, keyboards, double basses, drum kits, gramophones, records. The reason for this surely is not limited to the fact that Achenbach also used to play in a punk band. His studio still holds a drum kit and a small organ. I believe that there are only two reasons for this: One, the challenge of illustrating something that (since it is only accessible to the auditory sense) cannot be seen. Two, the fact that music contains a lot of the things that Achenbach finds fascinating about painting: rhythm and time, dynamics and diachrony, harmony and dissonance, composition and improvisation and most of all: the constructed and the unforeseen.

Music and painting seem to be based on similar laws. There is a reason why we speak of *Farbtönen* (tones of colour) and *Klangfarben* (tone colours), *dem Zusammenspiel von Farben* (harmony of colours), of harmonies and dissonances. While an attempt is made to present the relationships between colours in colour circles in the visual area, tone relationships are presented accordingly in the circle of fifths. Nevertheless, there is an essential difference: music plays in time. And this is the fact that Achenbach finds particularly fascinating. The transformation of something essentially temporal into the concurrent existence or timelessness of painting. If you have ever stood before a picture with a jazz band from Achenbach's oeuvre, you will know that rhythm, time and sound can be translated into a painting. It is virtually "full of music". The objects start to dance. Dance, by the way, is another one of Achenbach's motifs. It means nothing, of course...

Umbrellas at the end of time

In addition to the great philosophical question of space and time and their relationship to each other, there are lots of commonplace and very human things in Achenbach's paintings, as already mentioned. While the existential questions are rather treated in the painting as such and the painting technique, the everyday quality is in the motif. Achenbach: "The motif cannot possibly be too banal. It is not decisive for the quality

of a painting.” And so, Achenbach keeps on painting bicycles, mice, dogs, dance floors, hats and umbrellas. His pictures are not only a stage for painting as such, but also a great theatre of things. Things that float through Achenbach’s cosmos disconnected from space and time. Often, we associate implosions and explosions. We are nearly reminded of the beginning or end of all times. How nice to find an umbrella still!

This way, Achenbach creates his own universe, a colourful global theatre. Of course, he does not even need objects. Painting The ladder to the prologue is a purely abstract play of colours and shapes. Even here, the abstract shapes exude a joyful object-like air; it is hard to describe. Achenbach shows us things even if he doesn’t show them to us.

Sculpture and picture

Now we need to take a look at the exhibition’s sculptures. Achenbach’s sculptures are strongly connected to painting and to his pictures. Like the pictures, the sculptures combine the great and the small, the mysterious and the banal in a unique manner. One sculpture, for example, is made up of 20 steel rings of increasing size along a vertical axis, with a disc at their centre. We have already mentioned Achenbach’s “universe”. This seems to actually show us a gravitational system and a planetary object. The steel planet orbits are painted in the style of his paintings: patterns, stripes of colour and Op Art effects alternate with gestural strokes of the paintbrush. Since the offset steel circles make the sculpture spherical, the shape we see from different directions is similar. The differently painted fronts and backs of the 20 rings and the 40 different ring views, however, make the work look different from each angle. Again, Achenbach manages to apply a spatial-temporal dimension to his work. As we walk around the sculpture, its shape remains essentially the same, but the play of colours changes continually. The work thus acquires a strong painting-like quality. The play of colour entices us to walk around the sculpture, making the onlooker another planet, a “wanderer”.

Another sculpture of the exhibition also translates painting into three-dimensional objects. A picture or pattern that Achenbach pays homage to in his work time and time again comes from Victor Vasarely’s picture Vonal KSZ from 1968. This pattern is made up of about two dozen bluish and black frames nested in each other, forming a kind of tunnel effect. In his sculpture, Achenbach – figuratively – takes the painting by its outer frame and pulls it up; then he lets go, and the frames fall to the ground. Achenbach welded together this fall of frames, freezing it in time. We could call this a reversal of painting. While the picture makes the objects dance in two dimensions, they are locked in free fall in space. It’s only for a second, though. We always feel as if they would fall again in a moment, turning into a picture.

Finally, let me say another few words about the child-like topic of the “box of magic tricks”. It was filled mostly by predecessors from the last century: we will think of names such as Matisse, Kandinsky, Oskar Schlemmer, Johannes Itten, Robert Delaunay, as well as El Greco. It supports the humble attitude and the understatement of Christian Achenbach if he speaks of a child-like box of magic tricks when talking to his painting. In fact, it is a rare relaxed and mature way of handling a medium at least 37,000 years old and, as we have long known, immortal.

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