

Thomas Scheibitz

MATRIX Exhibit 195

1-geometrica B

November 18, 2001 - January 13, 2002



[Essay 1](#)
[Essay 2](#)
[Bibliography](#)

To stand before one of Thomas Scheibitz's vast canvases can be an unsettling experience: the brightly colored surfaces of his paintings manage simultaneously to convey unbridled energy and leave one inexplicably cold. It is precisely this paradox that enables the German artist to so successfully evoke the malaise of contemporary culture. His work hovers uneasily between abstraction and representation, residing within the ever-growing rift between lived experience and mediated image.

Each of Scheibitz's paintings features some recognizable and usually quite mundane object or landscape - a flower, an apartment building, a stairwell. This subject matter is then thoroughly abstracted, so that only the vestiges of its structure shine through. Solid forms are broken up into jagged planes of color, which are thickly outlined with contrasting hues in a manner reminiscent of the late-nineteenth-century Fauvists. Each shape manages to stand boldly alone, yet the composition never seems unduly fragmented; the shapes somehow coalesce to form a coherent whole.

The surfaces of Scheibitz's works are far from uniform: streaky brushstrokes and drips of color permeate the canvas, and some sections are left unfinished, merely sketched in. These visible traces of Scheibitz's process serve to activate his paintings, imbuing them with an expressionistic vitality. At the same time, Scheibitz's compositions keep his paintings at a chilly remove. We are clearly not invited to enter his world - an impression intensified both by the unyielding flatness of his picture plane and by the fact that his paintings are utterly devoid of figures.

Scheibitz is a brilliant colorist and carefully selects his palette to augment the formal tensions that distinguish his compositions. He favors the decadently ugly shades associated with 1970s chic - olive green, pale mauve, dull orange. These limpid colors are shot through with super-saturated sky blues, vivid reds, and lemon yellows, which infuses the canvas with a dynamism that counteracts its otherwise impassive demeanor. The placement of each color is precisely calculated to balance or neutralize its neighbors, a device which heightens the effect of extreme flatness. Even Scheibitz's concessions to architectural perspective fail to lend the paintings any depth. The deep contradictions that characterize Scheibitz's paintings - between vigor and apathy, flatness and depth, fragmentation and fusion - in a sense mirror the strange dislocations created by the digital age. We are surrounded by machines that promise to make life more productive, more exciting; instead, they seem merely to increase the pace and distance us further from reality. To effectively express the spirit of one's age is a challenge in any medium. To do so through painting, a medium so deeply identified with the past, makes Thomas Scheibitz's accomplishment extraordinary.

Thomas Scheibitz/MATRIX 195 will be Scheibitz's first solo museum exhibition in the United States. He will present an entirely new body of paintings, created during a three-month fall residency at the prestigious Headlands Center for the Arts in Marin County.

Adrienne Gagnon
 MATRIX Curatorial Assistant

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"I like working in two dimensions because the translation is immense. Through painting, all of the three-dimensional objects of the world are transformed into two dimensions. This is what makes a painting artificial." - Thomas Scheibitz¹

Earlier this year, German painter Thomas Scheibitz was included in an exhibition titled *Painting at the Edge of the World* at the Walker Art Center. As the name suggests, curator Douglas Fogle poses the question, "Where does the edge of the canvas end and the edge of the world begin?"² This notion of disorientation aptly describes the experience of the viewer when looking at Scheibitz's work. His fractured, complex, and vibrant works express the anxiety and energy of the contemporary era. The brightly colored paintings, drawings, and sculptures are abstracted renderings of familiar objects (flowers, buildings, landscapes) that straddle the traditional divides of abstraction and representation, popular imagery and art history, flatness and depth. The difference between subject and object is blurred. It is not necessarily clear where one thing depicted stops and another thing starts. The viewer cannot know where the edge or the center is because the continuous space seems to exist off the edge of the canvas. The space depicted is singular and yet connected to a larger environment, one full of dualities, conflicts, and contradictions.

[Essay 1](#)
[Essay 2](#)
[Bibliography](#)

It seems as if one cannot mount an exhibition of painting now without questioning the relevance of the medium. In the text I wrote for a Peter Doig exhibition in early 2000, I asked, "What is it about painting that provokes such ambivalence or even animosity?" Despite repeated critical pronouncements of their demise, paintings and painters persist. The Walker's Fogle notes that the reemergence as well as "apparent freedom and heterogeneity"³ of painting today can be traced to the historical precedents of three artists who "began to question the traditional modernist definitions of painting that were popular in the 1960s"⁴: Hélio Oiticica, Paul Thek, and Marcel Broodthaers. In addition to these artists, Gerhard Richter, a talented and multifaceted artist who moves adroitly between varied painting styles and photography and is as masterful at one as at the next, can be seen as an influence on Scheibitz.

As inspiration for his paintings Scheibitz collects source materials ranging from seventeenth-century art to commercial logos and sports photography. The longer one looks at his paintings - abstractions, landscapes, figures, and architecture - the more the grids and blocks seem to break down into graphic spaces and voids. And yet this is where Scheibitz separates himself from recent forays into abstract painting. These details and vacancies do not allude to a subtext behind the composition, nor do they allow the viewer to reach resolution, but instead leave one with an array of geometric forms, drips, and streaks of colored matter. In fact, some sections are left unfinished, merely sketched in. Scheibitz knows that contemporary life is in constant flux, time is short, and priorities must be made.

Other writers have correctly asserted that the motifs Scheibitz selects are less important than their ability to be "susceptible to what might be called, as if it were a sort of mathematical operation, Scheibitzian analysis."⁵ The artist himself, however, does not appear to be after any underlying "truth"; he recognizes this concept as a fallacy. Instead, each of his paintings seems to seek a synthesis of conflicting fictions - and the idea of the motif coming from somewhere out there in the world is just one such fiction.⁶ The notion of purity has long since been refuted and abolished.

An essential feature of Scheibitz's work is his choice of arresting and often discordant colors. He favors those that are decadent, even ugly. Like the subjects of his work, the colors are "something we almost know."⁷ Scheibitz uses oil paint watered down to an almost unrecognizable form, drippy and thin. Each color is placed on the canvas to convey a duality, simultaneously opaque and translucent, solid and diaphanous. The materiality of Scheibitz's subjects is not relevant to how the form is painted. Trees and skies are present or substantial or not. "That is why his paintings are at once so spacious and so solid. And it is why their effect can at one moment be that of complexity, while the next moment they feel plain and direct. The paintings are complex when you see how each segment opens up to a completely different space, so that the work no longer seems like a single picture but rather like a dozen all crammed into the same canvas."⁸ Very much of its moment, Scheibitz's work nonetheless returns us to something basic in painting: the way color can escape definition, become an autonomous organism whose qualities have already mutated by the time you have begun to codify them.⁹

Language - or more specifically, letters - sometimes appears in Scheibitz's paintings. He explains, "When I use letters in a painting, they have no meaning and cannot be read. Instead, they are compositional tools like details, flowers, or houses."¹⁰ In addition to being interested in their form and shape, he is compelled by how computers allow movement and manipulation so that letters become more like images, designs, logos.

Bannister Diamond (2001) is a landscape. We see a house and the sun and a vista. But there are also large planes of color that constitute unidentified things and pose the possibility that the seemingly serene rural setting is experiencing a jolt. Beneath the bright colors - vibrant blues and reds - there is a sense of foreboding. In *Judith & Maria* (2001) two foliate forms stand erect and side-by-side. Their branches or leaves jut from either side of their spines and reach toward the other form, seeming to seek solidarity or comfort. Set against a black and purple background, they, like the solitary figure in *Man* (2001), emerge from an atmosphere of darkness and possible devastation. They remind us that even in our digital age, when hyperconnectivity is commonplace, isolation exists.

The disorientation caused by these paintings is perhaps even greater because, while things seem available and even familiar, the differences between their world and ours are still very real. *Untitled* (Nr. 333) (2001) resembles a face peering out, questioning how and what the viewer sees. The face also easily breaks down into a parody of architectural forms, solids, and voids, suggesting the fragility of human life as well as of architecture. In the lower left of *1-geometrica B* (2001), homogeneous triangles, in shades of orange and white, morph from uncompromising flatness into the illusion of a five-pointed star. In this work, which shares its title with that of his MATRIX exhibition, the artist utilizes his skill in yet another transformation, one that leads the viewer from one dimension into another and then into a third.

A changing notion of reality can be experienced in Scheibitz's work. What one thinks one knows (and sees) changes depending upon the viewer's physical or psychological state at a particular moment. The meaning of normalcy, the permanence of architecture, and our sense of personal security are inalterably transformed by these paintings, which mirror the disorientation of contemporary existence.