

BARRY SCHWABSKY

In a cultural situation that does not offer much in the way of already-given subjects - one in which it is incumbent upon each artist to define his own - painters often find that only through persistence that the meaning or rather the potential range of meaning of a given subject only becomes clear through repetition. Repetition clarifies the artist's intention, not only for the benefit of his public but also for himself. Insistence becomes conviction. But he becomes less a painter than an image

somewhere out there in the world is just one such fiction.

Maybe what I've just described is a method after all, and I perpetrated a fiction of my own by stating earlier that Scheibitz seems to work without one. But still I value the feeling Scheibitz's oblique method allows him to communicate, which is that at last one can be free of method. Very much of its moment, his work nonetheless returns us to something basic in painting: the way color can escape definition, become an

## THOMAS SCHEIBITZ, PAINTER

engineer.

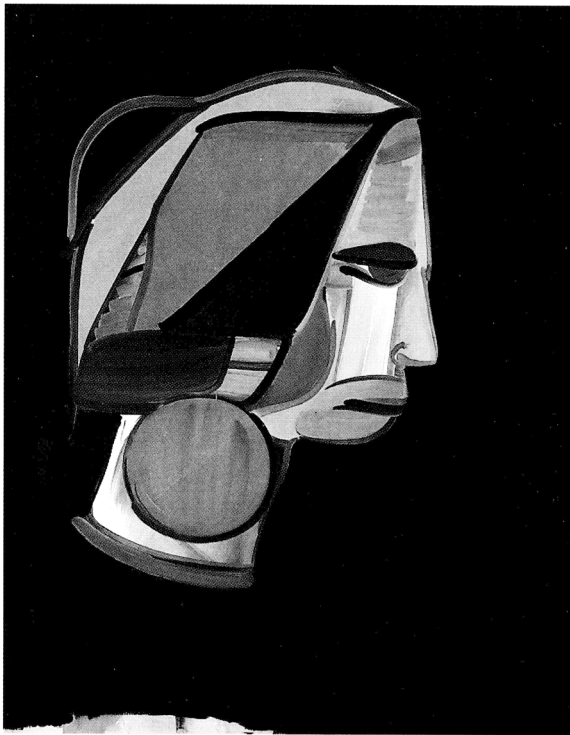
But that's not how Scheibitz works. He refuses to be a specialist, and he has not tied his destiny to an image. The motif he paints may come from architecture, landscape, the body, or even abstraction (and Scheibitz clearly recognizes that abstraction is now a set of motifs more than it is a belief system or even a method) but what's important is not the identity of the motif. It's that the motif be susceptible to what might be called, as if it were a sort of mathematical operation, Scheibitzian analysis. By this I am not referring to a formal analysis of the motif in the tradition of Cézanne and the Cubists, though certain paintings may seem to resemble the kinds of formal abstraction of a motif familiar from the art of the first half of this century (I'm thinking for example of *Tikky*, 1999, an abstracted head). The difference is that Scheibitz doesn't seem to be after an underlying visual truth. Instead, each of his paintings seems to seek a synthesis of conflicting fictions - and the idea of a motif coming from

autonomous organism whose rules have already mutated by the time you've begun to codify them. Typically, Scheibitz's colors are pale and almost sweet, yet their combinations are subtly discordant. But notice the more vehement inflections of a painting like *Heimat*, 1998; what's consistent is less a particular kind of color than a specific effect: each color area always seems to be both an opaque solid and a translucent atmosphere, so that a sky is always just as obdurate as a wall (*Haus*, 1998), a tree-trunk just as diaphanous as its foliage (*Apfelbaum*, 1998). That's why his paintings are at once so spacious and so solid, I guess. And it's 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, though your eye moves with such pleasurable smoothness from one to the

other; but the paintings are simple in the moment when the separateness of all those spaces fades away and each area starts to feel something like a single facet of a solid block of colored matter.

It may take some time to get used to or recall the difference: Thomas Scheibitz is not an image-maker, but a painter.

Barry Schwabsky is the author of *The Widening Circle: Consequences of Modernism in Contemporary Art* (Cambridge University Press, 1997). He writes regularly for *Artforum*, *Art in America*, *Art/Text*, and other publications.



*Ticky*, 1999, Öl auf Leinwand, 130 x 110 cm,  
Courtesy Bonaccar Jancou Gallery, New York