



THOMAS SCHEIBITZ

LOW
SWEETIE



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KEEP OUT THE PAINTING OF THOMAS SCHEIBITZ

Emma Dexter

Painters just keep on painting. But of course there's always the problem of what to do. You can reinvigorate the monochrome and explore the material world of paint. Or you can look sideways at contemporary life and media: from the petri dish or the pop star to the video or the computer, in the search for new forms and content. Scheibitz does none of these and that's what makes his work so slippery; there are no obvious quotations, no attempts to amuse or horrify the audience. The subject matter looks obvious and at first glance blandly generic - modernist buildings, views/landscapes, crystals, often with recurring motifs of stylised flowers and fences. The paintings share the same impure palette: the colours are sad and tainted and yet there are always plenty of them. Scheibitz's palette gives the paintings the strange ability to be bright and dull at the same time.

In *Pavillon*, 1999 and *Haus*, 1999, the dispassionate rendering of architectural shapes and a conformity to the rules of perspective is at odds with the strange energy that the paintings possess and the feeling of freedom and openness bestowed by the semi-abstract planes and shafts of pure colour. A freshness and immediacy is conveyed by the loose and even splashy handling of the brushwork and a discreet toying with speed and incompleteness. Drips and spatters cover the paintings. This is a painter who works fast and big. These are grand paintings,



Pavillon

made even grander by their cool emptiness. They seem so active, so strong, so certain, and yet elusive. Their graphic dynamism, their confidence and tactility are immediately seductive - a seduction that continues in the hunt for meaning within the paintings.

Scheibitz has developed a middle way of painting. On the one hand he expertly exploits the traditional techniques of painting which have been forgotten or pushed to the background in the 20th century obsession with surface. The Golden Section, perspective, interlocking diagonals, the deployment of foreground devices which help to lead the eye, these are deployed to create images that delight in a purely formal sense. The recurring flower/tree motif works compositionally in precisely the way that Constable deployed small figures within the landscape. Yet despite this relationship to history and sweeping gestures there is not

even a remote sense of any sublimity, as in Friedrich or Rothko. There is no splitting of the practice of painting into either nature (abstract) or photograph as is Richter. There is no uncanny content or construction as in Luc Tuymans. There is instead a distinct formal logic that breaks the canvas down to grids and blocks, sometimes ending in a different kind of painting which is more like a design.

Scheibitz has a strong graphic sensibility, even a hobbyist's enthusiasm for graphic design. In *Kinderhotel 99*, 1999, strong flat areas of colour and a certain short-hand graphic language remind one of Alex Katz's billboard style of painting (the first American billboards were painted). In Katz's landscapes however, there is always filmic glamour, the romance of the Peter Stuyvesant ad, every image mediated by the sheen of advertising, by a solipsistic engagement with the sales methods of the American Dream. But in Scheibitz nothing is being sold, nothing is available for sale. Objects and structures jostle each other in a complex dance and yet remain mysterious and unavailable. This is the mysteriousness of the modern world: the glass covered office block, the computer whose internal workings remain hidden from view and understanding. The various elements bear a relation to things in the real world but not so we can recognise them. They are kept out of reach - the picket fence says "keep out".

In *Offene Gegend*, 1998, the viewer commands a privileged position overlooking a modernist reworking of the ideal Renaissance town plan: blocks and shapes arranged in planes to denote buildings, with suns and moons and starbursts appearing between the cracks. This is an ambitious painting: the artist has laid out a template urban scene depicting public space, a kind of space that is becoming increasingly rare. Nowadays painting a landscape (if it is like *Offene Gegend*, your own apparently unmediated, unsampled version) is a grandiloquent, perversely autocratic act. It is an act that reveals (to quote the much used phrase of Yve-Alain Bois) the desire that "we believe again in our ability to act in history"* . But this painting is not as generous with its charms as it seems. It is a partial world; there are no figures inhabiting it, the city is deserted or not even completed, the painting has a feeling that it was suddenly stopped, that parts are unfinished, left with odd drips and streaks remaining. This is not the generic city where individuation has been stripped, here it has never been given. This is the blankness of denial and distance rather than sameness.

These are not the paintings of fragment (either literally or metaphorically), that Warholian species of depiction designated the quintessential American contribution to art history. This is painting which refers to an historical authority to depict landscape, to provide an expansive view. In *Low Sweetie*, 1999, we are offered a vista, a path winding down through an open landscape, (partially obscured by three large flowers in the foreground). Or at least it is the suggestion of a landscape - the insistent geometry of the interlocking forms and planes denotes fields or hills but at the same time scarcely depicts them. No detail is given, no encouragement to engage with the scene, except in terms of those tainted colours. So the viewer is given subject matter, position and perspective which, in another age could have suggested the sublime, yet in Scheibitz's paintings access to redemption is denied. Lulled into a false sense of security by recognizable traits, ultimately you're left with materiality. It's as if Scheibitz rehearses for us aspects of our Western pictorial traditions which are still dear, still functioning somewhere in debased forms, and teases us with an empty iteration, suggestive of that which has been lost. Ultimately *Low Sweetie* is a closed, and purely formal world, sky and land are rendered in the same criss-cross of geometric forms and the same range of tones, and with a horizon that is barely there. So what happens when you



Offene Gegend

examine this out of focus world more closely? Scheibitz does another kind of painting which he calls a *detail*. As in *Wandbild 5*, 1998, this is an exercise in form and colour, quite formulaic, like a Richter colour palette painting from the 1960s with attitude. But it's no surprise that the detail gives less information than the composition, there is nowhere to go to, only colour.

In *Casting*, 1999, a little town looks good, putting its best foot forward, but the place is barred, unapproachable - the town is viewed through a picket fence which places a grid across the painting. The fence functions as a reference to Mondrian's particular brand of modernism, but it is also the ultimate bourgeois symbol: used to signify complacency and property, it designates boundaries but tries to be nice at the same time. It tells strangers to keep out. Perhaps the viewer is now a stranger to this kind of homespun innocent image: with its lake, sunset and church with steeple, like a child's idea of a nice cosy home. You can no longer believe in these virtues, it seems to say: access is denied. The fence functions in the same way as the painting style does, it keeps you out, it prevents identification, stops longing, diverts desire.

In *Abteil*, 1999, the view is through a window. There is a lot going on outside the train: a lot of things, activity and colour and yet no information, its just stuff that goes by, out of focus, meaning nothing. This void is echoed in the a grey round form in the foreground of the painting. This hovering grey disc is like a hole in the painting, as if the painter could put it there just to prove that something was missing. Like an old style *memento mori*, it speaks of death and that which cannot be represented. Its emptiness complemented perfectly by the busy emptiness at the heart of the painting. The painting is busy doing nothing, it is a shadow trace of history.

*Yve-Alain Bois *Painting: The Task of Mourning*, printed in "Art in Modern Culture" edited by Francis Francina and Jonathan Harris, London, 1992, p.329