On What Is Really Seen
Vom tatsächlich Sichtbaren
MATTHIAS MEYER

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Sketch | **Entwurf Pilger**, 2007, 18 x 21 cm | 7.09 x 8.27 in.

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Foreword

Playing abstraction and figuration off against each other as if they were irreconcilable opposites has long since become a ritual in painting. This dichotomy – complete with the two opposing camps to which it has given rise – has persistently (and even against better judgement) been with us since the early days of modernism. Now, however, a younger generation of painters able to glide seamlessly between the two poles appears to have succeeded in consigning this anachronistic dividing line to the vestiges of art history. And among the artists belonging to the phalanx of this movement in Germany – thanks mainly to the technical and conceptual accomplishment of his method of applying layer upon layer of glaze – is Matthias Meyer. 'I'm not even sure that abstract paintings exist at all', says the artist born in Göttingen in an interview here in this book. Yet the imagery of his oil paintings is so diffuse that one could equally well ask whether figurative paintings exist in his work at all. 'Of the actually visible' thus admonishes us to review the phenomenology of painting again and again with a view to laying bare its deceptive character. The extent to which the illusory thematic complexes of Meyer's works have grown and become increasingly enmeshed over the past ten years is borne out by this book, the first major catalogue of his work to date.

Subdivided into chapters devoted to Meyer's water paintings, cityscapes, interiors and forests, substructures and superstructures, the leitmotifs drawn both from the world of nature and the world of urban civilisation do not always lend themselves to chronological ordering. Despite working from photographs and using small acrylic sketches to jog the memory, Meyer paints each painting from scratch in an extemporising style. 'It's a risk factor', he concedes, explaining how he in fact makes the painting 'abstract from back to front so that the moment a detail becomes recognisable, I immediately put a stop to the process'. The almost trance-like state in which they are painted is instantly apparent in the paintings themselves. Although the artist alludes to the historical antagonism between abstraction and figuration with great virtuosity, his painting retains an openness which today's viewers, with their very personal, sharply diversified ways of perceiving, find appealing. Poised between the vague and the concrete, Meyer defines our retinal impressions as phantasms played out on the periphery beyond which gravity has no purchase.

Birgit Sonna

Vorwort

Es ist längst zum Ritual geworden, Abstraktion und Figuration als antagonistisches Paar der Malerei gegeneinander auszuspielen. Seit der Moderne hat sich diese Dichotomie einschließlich ihrer jeweiligen Parteibildungen hartnäckig und selbst wider besseren Wissens gehalten. Einer jüngeren Generation von gelassen zwischen den beiden Polen changierenden Malern scheint nun aber die Auflösung der anachronistischen Demarkationslinien zu gelingen. Matthias Meyer gehört dank der technisch-konzeptuellen Raffinesse seiner lasierenden Malerei zu dieser Phalanx in Deutschland. „Ich bin mir im Grunde nicht einmal sicher, ob es überhaupt abstrakte Bilder gibt", sagt der in Göttingen gebürtige Künstler in dem hier publizierten Interview. Im Umkehrschluss dazu könnte man angesichts seiner motivisch diffundierenden Ölmalerei auch behaupten, dass es in seinem Werk auch keine wirklich gegenständlichen Bilder gibt. „Vom tatsächlich Sichtbaren" ist demnach als Appell zu verstehen, die Phänomenologie der Malerei immer neu auf ihren etwaigen Trugbildcharakter hin zu überprüfen. Wie sehr sich im Laufe von zehn Jahren die illusorischen Themenkomplexe von Matthias Meyer verzahnt und erweitert haben, zeigt dieser erste umfassende Werkkatalog.

Untergliedert in Kapitel wie Wasser- und Stadtlandschaften, Interieurs und Wälder, Untersichten und Konstruktionen fächern sich die aus der Natur sowie Urbanität entliehenem Leitmotive Meyers in dem Katalog nicht zwingend ihrer Chronologie folgend auf. Matthias Meyer nutzt zwar Fotovorlagen und auch kleinere Acrylskizzen als Gedächtnisstützen, die Gemälde selbst entwirft er jedoch davon losgelöst in einem improvisierenden Duktus. „Es ist ein Risikomoment", gesteht er. „Eigentlich baue ich das Bild abstrakt von hinten her auf, sobald ein Detail kenntlich wird, stoppe ich den Prozess wieder." Dem einzelnen Werk ist dieses fast traumwandlerische Vorgehen prima vista anzusehen. Auf den historischen Konflikt zwischen Abstraktion und Gegenständlichkeit spielt Matthias Meyer virtuos an, doch hat seine Malerei zugleich eine Offenheit, die der persönlichen, stark diversifizierten Wahrnehmung in unserer Gegenwart entgegenkommt. In einem Schwebeverfahren zwischen Unschärfe und Konkretisierung weist Meyer unsere retinalen Eindrücke als Phantasmen am Rande des Schwerkraftverlusts aus.

Birgit Sonna

Kelp, 2010, 150 x 160 cm | 59 x 63 in.

Unresolved Dissolution, Multivalent Perspectives and Dubious Blurring:
The Paintings of Matthias Meyer

Swaying between the figurative and the abstract, brown strands of seaweed wind their way up towards the dazzlingly bright surface of the water in *Kelp,* an almost square painting from 2010. To intensify the effect of depth in his depiction of nature on the two-dimensional canvas, Matthias Meyer locates his subject in the depths of underwater forests; in doing so, he strengthens the impression of spatiality. On closer inspection, however, it becomes apparent that the kelp – clearly recognisable as a plant form amid a swirl of bubbles – is vaguely suggested in its manner of depiction. Meyer is not meticulous, detailed and photorealist in his representation of nature; instead he sketches the leaf-like fronds in calligraphic sweeps of his brush. Such a wealth of detail evokes a host of associations in the viewer – even if much is concealed and blurred. In Matthias Meyer's work, this representation of seaweed from an underwater perspective takes its place in a line of watery motifs such as bogs (wetlands), waterfalls, or the surfaces of bodies of water that also relate in a figurative sense to the painting technique employed by the artist.

Everything Is in Flux

Meyer works with fluid, translucent media, such as heavily diluted oil paint and solvents that appear to run from his canvas much like drops of water. His paintings of the cascades on the river Saalach, which flows through Austria and the Berchtesgadener Land in Bavaria, translate the idea of fluid paint into the paintings themselves. Abstract acrylic sketches based on photographs form Meyer's starting point. Without making preparatory studies, he paints his motifs onto his canvases directly and rapidly, his colours applied wet-in-wet. As a result, layers of paint are superposed almost to the point of transparency, and blurred contours and controlled flows of paint, partially spattered from a distance, produce a fluid, transluscent impression. To control his paint, Meyer lays his canvas flat, yet the liquid paint still creates an element of chance that mars the seductive beauty of his paintings. Moreover, there is the effect produced by smudging and blurring, a topos whose meaning and painterly application are of special importance in Matthias Meyer's oeuvre.

The Absence of the Individual

Born in 1969, Matthias Meyer is first and foremost a painter of cityscapes and landscapes. Around the year 2000, he initially produced urban scenes that were more or less blurred; in recent years, motifs such as the surfaces of bodies of water and extreme-distance views have begun to make his paintings appear ever more abstract. Figures rarely animate his representations which – mostly in urban environments – assume little more than the generic outlines of plant forms in nature. Like different styles of architecture, plants appear to furnish Meyer with motifs for suggestive paintings that above all address questions of visual crystallisation and dissolution. In his portrayals of the large crowds of pilgrims attending the 2007 *Maha Kumbh Mela* in India, as well as those in *Lagos,* his 2010 paintings of the Nigerian capital, crowds of people become a means to produce spatial depth. Meyer's paintings of the festival and of the city share features of traditional battle scenes with their unimaginably large crowds. The artist collects photographs of people and uses them as the basis for his paintings of mass dance events like those in Rio de Janeiro (*Baile Funk, Rio, both 2008) or those of Laser Show and Sensation White* (both 2008) to add life to his infinite pictorial space. Photographic images are always the starting point for Meyer; whether he takes them himself or finds them, they allow him to go on imaginary journeys to the remotest corners on Earth and into space. The objective recording of reality, or rather of a detail of it, by the camera allows the reproduction of reality or nature with the greatest possible detachment, so heightening both neutrality and authenticity.

In his series of Water Paintings, so many layers of translucent paint are applied that the original underlying motif disappears: transparency yields to opacity. This is characteristic of Meyer's method of working: overlying stages of work give rise to various serial thematic clusters. As in the case of *Kelp,* which belongs to his series on reefs, even for the artist the outcome remains uncertain. The thematic clusters of his motifs, as well as the titles of his paintings, develop only in the course of his work. Meyer's method of working can most readily be described as a process. His decision to give his works titles in English can be explained by the fact that they have fewer associations for German speakers, thus allowing them to approach the work more freely.

Long-Distance Landscapes

It is above all Meyer's versatile handling of perspective that gives some indication of his treatment of the traditional genre of landscape painting. From originally offering views of paradise in Roman murals, it next became important as a backdrop for biblical and secular representations during the Middle Ages, reflected changes in the exploration of the natural world during the Renaissance, was notably developed by Dutch artists in the 15th century, and then functioned as a 'landscape of the soul' for the Romantics. All these depictions of landscape combined the same characteristic elements of trees, mountains and water. Alternating between an obsession with detail and scientific interest, the study of nature achieved great importance over the centuries. A change occurred in the demands made of landscape artists, especially during the 18th century when topographical accuracy increasingly became the focus of attention. Vedute were accurate depictions of the notable buildings and landscape features that distinguished particular places, and they frequently employed a high viewpoint.

At first (around 2000), Meyer produced cityscapes with a fixed central viewpoint, but subsequently his use of perspective in his cityscapes and landscapes became more and more unusual, the change between proximity and distance becoming clearer. Compared with traditional *vedute,* the buildings Meyer chose to paint in his cityscapes of Amsterdam, Brussels, Essen, Frankfurt am Main, et cetera (especially between 2000 and 2002) are unspectacular. Roads disappearing into the distance, bridge railings, canals or metro tunnels, combined with a tendency to view his subjects from a worm's-eye view, make it impossible for the viewer to gain a topographical overview or to be included in what is happening in the picture. In *Restaurant,* a painting from 2006, the slats of a Venetian blind parallel the support and fulfil a similar function. The distance this creates here forms a compelling contrast with the proximity of the image. In 2008, the artist made a painting of the London Eye in which the drop and the lighting induce a feeling of dizziness in the viewer. Architectural features that emphasise spatial depth also shape the artist's interiors, for instance the dome in his 2004 painting of *Siena Cathedral.* In his Water Paintings (2008–2010), in contrast, the extreme perspective widens out to include an infinite-seeming sky; there is no longer a fixed viewpoint within the painting. The development of the artist's use of perspective is at its most conspicuous in his current series of paintings entitled Satellites in which he chooses the most extreme of perspectives: a view of the Earth taken by a satellite in space.

While researching in Hong Kong in 2006, the artist encountered traditional bamboo scaffolding. In a whole series called *Scaffoldings,* scaffolds lend structure to the pictorial space in which again the painter does not show us points of interest and striking locations, but tall buildings and their structures instead. As in *Hong Kong 4* from 2007, his complex lattice structures are meticulously constructed grids that produce a compelling impression of spatial depth. Described by Rosalind E. Krauss as 'an emblem of modernity',[1] early instances of such formal means are seen in the work of Piet Mondrian, Hans Arp, Man Ray and Josef Albers: 'Without doubt the most formulaic construction that could possibly be mapped on a plane surface, the grid is also highly inflexible . . . For the grid *follows* the canvas surface, doubles it . . . through its mesh it creates an image of the woven infrastructure of the canvas . . . The grid thus does not reveal the surface, laying it bare at last; rather, it veils it through a repetition.'[2] For Meyer, a grid structure is a means to produce spatial depth in the surfaces of his paintings.

Photographed and Painted Reality

Yet what is the result of foregoing a direct impression in favour of the use of original photographs? Painting has traditionally led us to believe that it is a medium of illusion, while the technology of photography is able to create a 'true' image of reality. This is exactly why photography had to fight to be recognised as an art form well into the 1970s, even if all the prerequisites for painting seemed to change as early as the mid-19th century – as a result of advancing technological developments in photography and the possibilities they offered – which in the end gave rise to constant rivalry between the two genres. When Paris of old had to make way for the modern city around 1850, for instance, it was on thousands of occasions the subject of the new invention of photography whose mechanically and chemically produced images possessed a degree of detail that until then had been unthinkable in hand-made pictures. Moreover, this modern metropolis attracted hosts of artists who were ready to embrace progress. Their fascination was also revealed in the development of a wholly new style of painting that no longer had the aesthetically pleasing in its sights, but which aimed rather to illustrate the visual processes within the viewer's eye: Impressionism. Differentiating it from photography, Hubertus Gaßner even speaks of an 'emphasis on manual creation' in Impressionism, 'for instance through the use of complete or partial

1 Rosalind E. Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1986), p. 10.

2 Ibid., pp. 160–61.

blurring, soft contours, sketchy execution, emphasis on facture and the haptic texture of a painting's surface'.[3] A further stylistic aspect is associated with motion blur – originally an unwanted side effect of long exposure times. Only since the early 20th century has photographic material been sufficiently sensitive to allow movement to be captured on film. Then as now, blurring in art or photography is also used to flee the hectic present that overwhelms the senses, and to evoke a rose-tinted idyll in the eye of the beholder. On the other hand, motion blur can be used to portray as accurately as possible the pulsating dynamism of the present. The paintings of Matthias Meyer, too, range between these two poles – escapism on the one hand, and the pursuit of the greatest possible realism on the other. This quality is evident in *Charing Cross,* his 2002 painting of the topographic centre of London: the vertical brushstrokes of the windows indicate that the trains are stationary, while horizontal brushstrokes suggest people hurrying past. As in his landscapes, Meyer uses rapid brushstrokes here, too, in his attempt to capture his blurred visual impressions.

Dubiousness of the Image

'A photograph is more reliable and more credible than any painting. It is the only picture that portrays with absolute truth because it sees "objectively"; people tend to believe a photograph first even if it is technically flawed and what it shows is barely recognisable.'[4] With his blurred, photorealistic copies of illustrations chosen at random from newspapers and magazines, Meyer's teacher at the Düsseldorf Academy, Gerhard Richter, publicised photography's technical weakness – blurring – as a category of dubiousness of the reality of the painted and photographed image. Yet it was the artists born between 1955 and 1975 – as was Matthias Meyer – and to whom the 'New Realists' or the artists of the New Leipzig School belong, who ensured that painting flourished again. Then again, landscape painting is very much associated with contemporary processes of abstraction, which is why there are many non-figurative representations of it. As an expression of this dubiousness, blurring – besides occurring in the work of a number of contemporary painters and photographers, such as Karin Kneffel (b. 1957), Wolfgang Ellenrieder (b. 1959) or Michael Wesely (b. 1963) – appears to be present in Matthias Meyer's work, too, and to be particularly influenced by computer-assisted video technology. The *sfumato* employed by Leonardo da Vinci as a kind of hazy veil can be regarded as the art-historical predecessor

3 Hubertus Gaßner, 'Unscharf – Bilder der Einbildung', in *UNSCHARF: Nach Gerhard Richter,* ed. Hubertus Gaßner and Daniel Koep, exh. cat. Hamburger Kunsthalle (Ostfildern-Ruit, 2011); translation.

4 Gerhard Richter, 'Notizen 1964–1965', in *Gerhard Richter: Text. Schriften und Interviews,* ed. Hans-Ulrich Obrist (Frankfurt am Main and Leipzig, 1996), p. 25; translation.