

In the end it is painting

The fact that this painter thinks in images is unlikely to surprise anyone. Is that not what every painter does? But the fact that Jochen Pankrath paints thought-images is rather more of a surprise. What is even more surprising is his statement that he sees the figural in non-representational terms. Is he not thus contradicting the sadly no longer fashionable concept of thought-painting, under which such different painters as Michael Mathias Prechtel or Neo Rauch are subsumed? After all, thought-images should indeed be representational, offering motivic associations, constellations of people or artefacts, or figurative terms – something for the eye and the mind in equal measure. But should there also be a juxtaposition or interpenetration, an equivalence of the representational and the non-representational?

The image within an image is Jochen Pankrath's method and has been ever since his time as a student when he sought to go beyond the individual image, refusing to accept the limitation of the canvas when in his opinion it excluded the reality outside the image. "What is important for me is how the image relates to what is outside. (...) The gap between reality and the image space has always interested me." These words can be found in a conversation between Jochen Pankrath and his art school teacher quoted in his first catalogue with the programmatic title "Über den Rand" [Beyond the edge] (2011). Clearly the artist is interested in a dialogue with the enlightened viewer on or by means of the canvas. To choose a motif and paint it is both legitimate and honest, but to interrelate things that are different or even contradictory is something else again. So, too, is the visual reference to the intellectually productive difference between reality and art. A small portrait-format work entitled "konvertiert" [converted] (2018/2019; instead of a noun, J.P. chooses a past participle for the title) shows a wooden-handled kitchen knife at the bottom of the painting. It is painted in a loose and at the same time realistic fashion; the knife even casts a shadow as if it is floating above the image space. Above it, there is an area of blue that has been worked with a blade, showing streaks and score marks of light and dark grey. The knife that served as the model for the painted object lies on the top edge of the painting. The viewer can study the similarities and the differences between the real and the painted knives – the object and the conception of it in the painting. The painter's choice of title gets to the heart of this phenomenon that he expands upon in his comment, for he who converts is a convert, i. e. one who changes from one state to another by adopting principles that were hitherto new to him. And art has to be believed in; it is a matter of conversion! Incidentally, the knife motif had already appeared in a painting from 2013 showing an easel with a canvas on which a knife has been painted. However, offset to one side, the shadow of the knife has been painted in such a way that the viewer is intrigued as to whether the image within the image shows a painted knife to which a shadow has been added, or instead of that, an easel with a blank canvas, in front of which a knife is suspended. This earlier small painting is revealingly titled "Der unbekannte Surrealist" [The unknown surrealist] (a reference to Balzac's famous short story "The unknown masterpiece/Le chef-d'oeuvre inconnu" from 1831).

Not only the knife paintings are intimately linked with surrealism; so, too, are the canvases titled "Der Traum von Freiheit" [The dream of freedom] I & II (both 2018). It is no coincidence that one is

reminded of René Magritte¹ and his still ubiquitous artistic statement “Ceci n`est pas une pipe”, with the pipe that is painted and therefore not a real one. The choice of a pipe to demonstrate this can be explained by the fact that there was a saying among the competing surrealists in Paris that poetry was a pipe, by which they meant to establish a clear ranking between poetry and painting – with painting considered to be superior to poetry because it was more poetic. The title of Magritte’s painting is not that famous line, however, but “The treachery of images” (1928/1929). In Jochen Pankrath’s “Der Traum von Freiheit I”, the symbol of peace, i. e. the dove, appears in the form of a coloured sketch on a painted sheet of transparent paper that seems to have been attached with adhesive tape to the canvas, upon which something like a cloud consisting of round, balloon-like shapes floats above a landscape. This painted dream of freedom, with an incompletely executed dove that moreover appears to have been painted on flimsy paper and seems only to be temporarily attached to the actual motif, disavows its lofty title. Such freedom may be ‘picture-perfect’, but it is indeed ‘only’ a picture. If what is supposed to be human freedom is to float above the earth like a bunch of helium-filled balloons, then the artist is painting something here that has no foundation in reality. And what is freedom anyway? Helium, or hot air? The treachery of images can only be felt by a dreamer who takes such abstract concepts as ‘freedom’ at face value and proclaims them without a context.

Every question in art about truth is conversely the question about truth in art. This is referred to in the title of the painting “Der Weg zur Wahrheit” [The path to truth] (2018). A large naked female torso occupies the centre of this portrait-format painting; to the torso’s right lies its severed head, upon which sits a woodpecker; to the left of the torso there is a grey pigeon of the sort ubiquitous to our cities. Woodpecker and pigeon are painted very realistically and yet are no less ‘false’ than the rest of the painting. Both birds face towards the centre from their respective sides of the painting and stare out wide-eyed at the viewer. Both of them have Christian symbolism. The dove will still be familiar to many a viewer as the symbol of the Holy Spirit, but what is rather less widely known is that the woodpecker can serve as a symbol of the Devil. The holy and the unholy? The torso is covered in patches and traces of paint – as though defiled – although the breasts have been left out, seemingly protected by a flimsy top, while, disconcertingly, the pudenda are covered and highlighted at the same time by a tiny grey triangle which contradicts the classical references of the torso, as it suggests a modern G-string. The path to truth – in this painting in particular, but also in general – is always a question of interpretation, which is why there is hardly ever only one single (“the”) path.

The associations that Jochen Pankrath creates are multifarious. In complex compositions such as the one just described, he seems to be a kind of philosophical artist. Whether that is “the” truth remains open to question. In some cases, the viewer is unsettled by simple means. The landscape entitled “Tektonik” [Tectonics], for example, is in its way almost literally a broken, distorted image. Painted on a wooden panel that has a step in it, the idyllic, gently rolling hills depicted here appear to have slipped out of place, thus preventing the eye from resting undisturbed in a dreamy, comfortable gaze. There are intricate, rebus-like images, such as the summoning of ‘Spirits of the past’ (“Geister der Vergangenheit”, 2018/2019), in which a young woman wearing nothing but a skirt sits topless and barefoot on a pile of four large books, with another coffee-table book lying open on her knees. She is studying the reproduction of a painting on the left-hand page of this art book, while her right elbow is leaning on the right-hand page that contains the full-page drawing of a dove that makes one

¹ for, as Elias Canetti said: “All artists are cannibals, consuming their ancestors” in *Das Buch gegen den Tod* [Book against Death], 2014, TB Frankfurt a.M. 2015, p. 59

think of a Picasso or a child's drawing. The young woman is resting her head on her hand in an attitude that is pensive, but also somewhat listless, without any body tension. She is sitting in an undefined space in front of a dark wall to which an unfinished large-format painting has been affixed with paper tape, as painters do when they are working on a painting before stretching it on a frame. The painting, which is larger than the woman sitting in front of it, shows a floating head that could be from an antique sculpture, with the 'dead' eyes of a classical piece that has lost its original strong colouring. The back of the head, however, broadens into something reminiscent of a bonnet, a head scarf or even a halo. Large areas of the straight front-facing head are covered in pottery fragments, as found on a mosaic figure. Is the young woman an artist's model leafing through an art book in the studio during a break? Or is she in fact the painter and is looking for ideas? The age of antiquity and decay stand in contrast to a young generation. In this respect, the painting is also a 'memento mori'. The books are archives that preserve the spirits of the past (the ancestors), just as the unfinished *image within an image* is the echo of a vanished history in which art was not yet art, but a cult.

Another facet of reflection on art as art is revealed by the small-format work entitled "Das Bild" [The image] (2018). As with the knife painting ("konvertiert"), this work has precursors in "Der Versuch, einen Richter zu fälschen" [The attempt to forge a Richter], I & II (both 2015). Anyone with an interest in contemporary art will recognise in the background of "Das Bild" something resembling a painting by Gerhard Richter, in front of which a girl in a leotard or bathing suit is doing stretching exercises. Further depth is added to the two levels in the painting by means of three loosely and somewhat carelessly painted grey triangles that appear between the girl's legs, partly covering her shins and flanking her legs. The grey triangles, which bear a certain resemblance to pointed hats, add not only elements of chromatic abstraction and realism, but also a third idiom, namely that of Bad Painting. Painters use different styles to claim their intellectual property. Gerhard Richter is unusual in that he did not stay with one style at a time when he already enjoyed great success. As a painter, he is more versatile – in a way multi-stylistic – than any successful artist before him. All other living artists act in some way in this regard, whether they like it or not.

Finally, this catalogue contains a group of hitherto unpublished portraits showing heads of philosophers (Socrates) or models in which the flesh tones have been replaced with areas of abstract colour. Jochen Pankrath produced these portraits by taking the canvases or wooden panels from the easel, laying them on the floor of his studio and then standing on them and using them to wipe off surplus paint, allowing paint to drip onto them at random and using them quite simply for storage space or, in a way, as scrapers. These traces of paint were created in a completely uncontrolled and seemingly unintentional manner. They provide the grounding. After that, Pankrath painted the heads, their contours and the surroundings/backgrounds on top of the undesigned grounding. Where one would expect flesh tones, one finds an abstract area that has the character of a painting within the actual motif. The face, or the facial skin, consists of random colourscapes. But this time, it is not intended as a quotation, reference or adaptation, but as a mere find – as found art, so to speak. In one case, the abstract coloured area fits into the head (usually a pedestal-mounted sculpture) in an illustrative fashion; in another, it has the effect of iconoclastically destroying the painted sculpture: what gives the appearance of a head of red hair in "Die Idee" [The idea], appears to be overpainting in "ap 17" or a Beethoven-like head in "ap 15". One of the heads resembles a globe on which the colours represent the oceans and the landmasses, while another is the product of the good old habit

of seeing shapes, as Leonardo da Vinci once described upon looking at an old stained wall². Pankrath seems to be playing with the fact that fiction differs from truth in that the former must have a meaning. The truth, on the other hand, may be alogical and meaningless. (To quote Helmut Qualtinger's bon mot, "The lie is more truthful than the truth, because the truth is so false").

The references and links to art history and the associative thought-figures entering the "gap between image space and reality" have become very numerous in Jochen Pankrath's work. René Magritte, one of the great thought-painters, could be named as a source of inspiration for one or other of the motifs. One need only compare his "Attempt at the impossible" (1928), in which a painter is shown painting, or rather creating, not the image of a female nude, but in fact an actual woman. Pankrath has produced similar artistic concepts in the past, but also among his new paintings there are those that concern the gulf between art and reality – for example "Mimikry" (2018). Here, the pedestal-mounted female torso is a realistically painted nude. In fact, it is a horror version of Magritte's *attempt at the impossible*, for, assuming that it is a reproduction of it, the woman's (painted) torso, which is displayed like an exhibit on a metal pedestal, could only have come from the cannibal's store of a Hannibal Lecter.

These thought-figures prove that Jochen Pankrath is quite the painter as defined by Bazon Brock, himself an artist and art theoretician, who defines a painter as follows:

"... a writer proves his identity as a writer by reading. A painter... is one who knows what others have painted and knows this not only superficially, but really. A composer is one who knows what others have composed."³

Only through engaging with tradition – in Jochen Pankrath's case that of existing European painting – can something new be conceived. On the one hand, he brings the past to life, while on the other hand reinterpreting it by entering into a dialogue with it, no matter how paradoxical and fanciful the pairings of images that he invents or associates may be. When the artist attempts to look into the gap between image space and reality, he may succeed in forming a new image concept – but, of course, purely in artistic terms. (Otherwise he would in fact be a philosopher.) His choice of emotive titles such as "The path to truth", "The dream of freedom", "Truth", "The birth of form" or "Spirits of the past" suggests that he is a self-doubting truth-seeker in the best artists' tradition. Even thought-paintings may occasionally be art for art's sake, but much more often they take seriously the responsibility that is connected with the imagination. In the end, it is simply painting that has to treat the figural and non-representational equivalently if it has any aspiration.

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translated by Anna Bode

² "...if you look at certain walls with various stains or with a mixture of different types of stones; (...) you can see there resemblances to a variety of landscapes, with mountains, rivers, rocks, trees, great plains, valleys and hills of different kinds; also you can see various battles, figures with lively postures, strange facial expressions and costumes, and an infinite number of things..." Leonardo da Vinci, Manuscript A, 1492, in André Chastel (ed.), *All the paintings and the writings on painting*, Munich 1990, p. 384-385

³ Café Deutschland, In conversation with the first art scene in the FRG. Bazon Brock, 15.11.2015, at <https://cafedeutschland.staedelmuseum.de/bazon-brock>