Jochen Pankrath – Where the Forest Opens to Light

New Watercolors on Canvas

The forest is one of the most enduring subjects in European landscape painting. For centuries, it has been a subject of artistic observation of nature and, at the same time, a place where ideas of nature, space, and human perception converge. Particularly in Romantic painting, the forest became a motif that extended beyond the mere depiction of the visible landscape. Its distinctive atmosphere, the interplay of light and shadow, and the relationship between proximity and distance offered artists the opportunity to portray nature not simply as a physical environment, but as a subjective experience.

With the exhibition **"Where the Forest Opens to Light,"** Bode Galerie presents a selection of new works by Jochen Pankrath on the occasion of his receiving the 2026 Cultural Award of the City of Fürth in the category of Visual Arts. These small-format works explore a familiar landscape motif that acquires a distinctive atmospheric quality through the particular combination of painting technique, support, and compositional reduction.

For this body of work, Pankrath uses watercolor on canvas. The combination of these two media is unusual, as watercolor painting is traditionally executed on paper. While the absorbency of paper supports the characteristic transparent washes and fluid transitions of watercolor, canvas possesses a distinctly textured, woven surface. Pankrath explores the qualities of this combination by bringing together transparent layers of color and precise linear elements, while visibly incorporating the texture of the canvas into his compositions.

In his forest landscapes, the artist moves between representational observation of nature and painterly simplification. Darkly outlined tree trunks and widely extending branches lend the compositions a clear structure, while the vegetation in the distance gradually dissolves into simplified silhouettes and transparent areas of color. Some trees are defined by just a few characteristic lines, while others appear almost like graphic signs. This interplay between linear precision and painterly openness shapes the distinctive visual language of these works.

Color plays an essential role in the construction of pictorial space. Warm earth tones and shades of red in the foreground contrast with cooler blues and greens. Through this chromatic layering, Pankrath creates a sense of spatial depth that extends far beyond the actual dimensions of the small canvases. At the same time, larger areas of the picture plane remain only lightly worked or almost entirely unpainted.

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The visible weave of the canvas thus becomes an integral part of the pictorial effect. Rather than the meticulous rendering of every detail, it is the deliberate interplay of color, line, and open space that determines the appearance of the landscape.

It is precisely this reduction that gives the works their distinctive atmospheric quality. Pankrath's forests remain clearly recognizable, yet they possess a strangely otherworldly character. The simplified forms of the trees, the transparent transitions of color, and the open areas of the compositions lend the landscapes a quiet, almost enchanted atmosphere. This sense of mystery does not arise from a narrative staging of the scene, but from the painting itself. Familiar natural forms are reduced to a few essential characteristics, leaving room for the viewer's imagination.

The small format also contributes significantly to this effect. Rather than depicting expansive landscape panoramas, Pankrath directs our attention to carefully selected fragments of nature. Each of these fragments develops its own spatial structure and atmosphere. Without reference to a specific geographical location, the landscapes emerge as self-contained pictorial spaces. The recurring motif of the forest path, in particular, invites the viewer to imagine moving deeper into the image, without suggesting a predetermined destination.

The exhibition title, **“Where the Forest Opens to Light,”** brings together two essential aspects of this body of work. On the one hand, it refers to the natural phenomenon of the forest canopy opening, allowing light to penetrate the wooded space. On the other, it describes a painterly principle: open areas emerge between the forms of the trees, contours become more permeable, and the landscape gains a sense of lightness through the transparent application of color. The opening of the forest thus becomes not only a subject, but also a characteristic of the pictorial composition itself.

Jochen Pankrath's new watercolors on canvas demonstrate how a multifaceted landscape can emerge from just a few distinctive forms, subtle variations in color, and deliberately preserved open spaces. Between close observation and painterly interpretation, small forest worlds take shape, retaining a sense of familiarity while developing their own quiet atmosphere. They invite us to experience the forest not only as a visible natural environment, but also as a place of perception and imagination.

Anna Bode