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THOMAS PIHL

By Peter Lodermeyer

What is the point today of a kind of painting that shows us large areas of homogenous fields of color seemingly without texture? Would it be for meditation, introspection, a subjective experience of color as a space for escape and meditation? The extent to which such clichés suffice for doing justice to the broad spectrum of what is vaguely referred to as "color-based painting" need not be discussed here. They do not apply here. For Thomas Pihl is an artist aware of the fact that our everyday culture is obsessively reliant on visual stimulation and information by the mass media. Economic and political interests inevitably pervade the aesthetics and transform our perceptions with their respective manipulations. This conviction that a socially "neutral" aesthetics does not exist enters into the way he creates his works. In order to penetrate to this critical core of Pihl's painting, however, the viewer must commit himself with the hard currency of the scarcest commodity known to our hyper-commercialized, globalized contemporary culture: time. Pihl's paintings demand patient, precise, and self-reflective viewing, a slowing down of our gaze.

This poses a challenge to our perception that has been trained to grasp information quickly. In the museum world, exhibition pieces with a viewing duration of more than 20 seconds are regarded having great "holding power". Pihl's paintings require a distinctly longer time before they reveal themselves as complex pictures that modify our perception. First we see seemingly perfect, oblong rectangular fields of color of uncertain spatial depth and a gentle, diffuse glow. In this respect, they meet our contemporary expectation of a paradigmatic picture form: What Leon Battista Alberti's 'open window', once was since Renaissance times in terms of the picture concept, is today the smooth, radiant screen, which generates worlds of images addictively consumed. In an age of digitalized, commercialized aesthetics, an "image" is the thing that shows up on monitors.

In formats of 60 x 96 inches, Pihl's paintings display roughly the same proportions as the human binocular field of vision with a scope averaging about 130° x 180°. This means that the works completely fill up our field of vision if we assume the correct distance to them. Pihl prefers hanging his works low, their upper edges approximately at eye level. This deviation from the standard turns out to be advantageous for our gaze: Our heads relaxed, the gaze of a person standing up straight falls to about 25° below the horizontal edge. The longer we gaze, the more multi-layered the color planes seem. And here, the multi-layered character is not only evident in the fact that the pictures consist of several layers of poured, transparent acrylic paint and that we only slowly become conscious of the colors that emerge from the depths. Of multi-layered complexity is also the emotional reference to the colors. The colors are increasingly intangible, eluding precise definition and, because of this ambivalence, they do not correspond to clear, emotional qualities. Over time, due to the way the color appears to vibrate, our gaze loses its grip. It is all the more astonishing when the eye suddenly perceives a tiny irregularity, and the painting immediately regains a comprehensible material surface. This proves that the surface certainly does not display the perfection and smoothness of technically produced pictures, but rather it is characterized by material "blemishes". Due to the fact that Pihl takes up the seductive and aesthetic attractiveness of contemporary picture aesthetics (even as he undermines the subtle expectations we connect with it), he manages to offer much more than mere "information". His works avail us to experiences that whet and intensify our perception, an indispensable instrument for a conscious and critical navigation through the hyper-aestheticized civilization we live in.

