

## From Great Realism to Great Abstraction

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Every day, as human beings, we accumulate apparently banal, visual experiences which offer us guidelines and instructions with no intervention by our consciousness.

In this context, Wassily Kandinsky spoke of "Great abstraction, great realism" and of a "reduction of art to its artistic essence, which could only ultimately lead to a moulded life with an emphasis on certain forms." This leitmotif is also found in the work of Yves Zurstrassen, the inventor of forms who conglutinates his experiences and his creative energy entirely consciously. In a certain segment of his artistic work, he transforms the codes and impulses inherent to these apparently banal experiences and transposes them into his unique, formal language, which has become his international hallmark.

Following a highly successful exhibition at the IKOB (the contemporary art museum in Eupen) in 2004, I invited Yves Zurstrassen to present works from 2009 in the context of an exhibition called "Grid Paintings – Aktuelle abstrakte malerei" (Grid Paintings – Contemporary Abstract Painting) in the heart of Belgium's German-speaking community, not far from Germany and the Netherlands. This second exhibition is perfectly timed, as during recent years the Brussels artist has produced highly contemporary pieces, which fit squarely within the worldwide trend towards this new, international abstraction tinged with conceptualism. Of course, in his view they are essentially a matter of form and colour, but the focus of his interest is this contrast and tension between the expressive freedom of the brushstroke and a very strict conception of the composition of the painting.

On his travels, Zurstrassen uses his mobile phone to photograph all kinds of structures, motifs, grids and frames found in the streets, houses and historic buildings which constitute a part of our European cultural identity. Through a unique and highly complex combinatory technique, where initial photographic information is associated with computer-assisted image processing linked up to a cutting machine, he creates an extremely fine stencil in unprinted newspaper which he uses several times during the painting process, pasting it onto the linen, covering it with colour, alternating layers of paint on the stencils and stencils on the layers of paint. In a very short space of time which assumes a prior conceptualisation of the composition, choice of colours and surface structure, the artist has to create his painting with a relative speed without ever being able to contemplate its entirety. At the end of this operation, he seeks out all the glued stencils hidden beneath the layers of paint and detaches them, like membranes, using tweezers and at the same time he removes part of the preceding pictorial layers; it is a composition method that is resolutely opposed to the traditional technique of a strata of accumulated paint.

Zurstrassen's formal language is based on signs, symbols and colours, to become an abstract, pictorial language marked by superimpositions of highly gestural brushstrokes and endlessly repeated, recurrent motifs, with networks, grids and geometric structures. We encounter these daily in the polymorphous plant and animal world, in the structures of manhole covers, the designs on ceramic wall and floor tiles, printed

motifs on wallpaper, fabrics and carpets, as well as in mural reliefs, friezes and window frames. They are also found in geometric symbols specific to various cultures or in the materials of fences and wooden palisades, visual screens, structured glass and even in structural analyses established by scientists to represent atoms, crystals and molecules.

Since the early 1980s, Yves Zurstrassen has worked in the field of abstract painting, leagues ahead of the residual influences of modern Parisians that are still exhibited nationally, even though conceptual art is above all presented in international exhibitions.

It was not until the German artist Gerhard Richter brought painting out of the shadows and helped the medium of oil to achieve a new status that art critics and exhibition curators began once again to look at abstraction. American artists from the New York scene, but also and above all Europeans such as Peter Doig, Günther Förg and Bernard Frize, met with great interest. The Brussels Region recently commissioned Yves Zurstrassen to incorporate a work of art into an urban context. In April 2009, *A Beautiful Day* was solemnly unveiled at the Gare de l'Ouest underground station in Molenbeek, one of the busiest intersections in the Brussels transport network. A four-metre high wall, extending about one hundred metres alongside the train track, is filled with a host of motifs borrowed from cultures from around the world. Zurstrassen transferred them onto metal plates, sometimes by making photographic enlargements of his paintings. The entire work expresses the demographic plurality of this multicultural district of Brussels.

Zurstrassen produces free painting, as aspired to by the protagonists of abstractionism. It is painting that expresses neither perceptible, personal feelings nor any message, not even political. He invites the observer to find his own way into his painting by positioning himself freely in relation to the form, colour and movement, as well as these motifs which belong to his sphere and take into account the social context.

Zurstrassen's painting constitutes a unique renewal of the pictorial technique and structural treatment of the painting's surface, through the application of oil on canvas.

It is a permanent tribute to forms, colours, movements and structures which, following the meandering course of aesthetics, flow into the immensity of the sublime.