

(1) Sans titre 1983 97x146 cm



(2) Sans titre 1987 200x215 cm



(3) Sans titre 3 1991 195x150 cm

Yves Zurstrassen is totally dedicated to painting; even if the subject of a series of paintings could be the same, his work is always and exclusively concerned with the problems of painting. It is not possible to know whether out of art questions enter into and influence the character of his pictures. Since Zurstrassen, as a matter of principle, definitely rejects concrete images, it is not possible to perceive any direct relationship to the tangible world. But there is one topic he is continuously dealing with and that is the history of art itself.

Today, no painter can afford to bypass a confrontation with the mainstream and the revolutionary developments which occur in the field of art. A lack of information would not be excused. As a consequence, in the impressive atelier building in Brussels, Zurstrassen's art library is extraordinarily rich and varied, with illustrated volumes about internationally renown artists, as well as Belgian artists. Zurstrassen apparently makes a point of embracing the existing knowledge in its entire bandwidth, while examining it critically and enthusiastically, and continuously redefining his terrain therein.

Searching for his own way, he starts at the beginning of the 1980s with a practical examination of his artistic ancestors and colleagues, approaching these related minds through his painting. So, in an earlier phase, one finds paintings where the pictorial surface is filled from the centre, with an explosion of short brush strokes in a range of similar hues (1). This informal process still carries traces of Impressionism and, with its spontaneous rhythms, follows in the footsteps of Wols, Mark Tobey or a Jackson Pollock.

Almost at the same time, Zurstrassen takes up a painting approach near to the Tachism or, more precisely, towards abstract Expressionism. Despite periodic fluctuations, this

strongly expressive application of colour, which is characterised by a forceful temperament, dominates his work up to the end of the millennium. The range of colours is dominated primarily by melancholy brown tones, which vary between beige-ochre and a darker black-brown. On a mostly lighter background, a kind of combat can be observed between the powerfully positioned, dark and hard-edged surfaces, and the irregular streaks of colour and circular forms applied across the surface with a broad brush. The concepts of a Pierre Soulages, Franz Kline or Karl-Otto Götz stand correspondingly much closer to these colour jungles, than the much more light-footed and airy painting style of Arshile Gorky (3).

Only occasionally the colour palette lightens towards a soft carmine red, or a greenish yellow that peeps through the beams; at times one can even see the three primary colours in competition with one another. On the 1986-1988's large canvas, the painting breathes the bold colour definitions of Willem de Kooning (2), a painter that Zurstrassen will often reference during discussions, most probably and not least because the complicated structure of the pictorial space is what interests him in this naturalised American painter with European roots. While the fore- and background are more clearly differentiated between strongly contrasting colours of warm white and black, the finely nuanced colour surface is entrapped in the multifaceted movements of jutting and receding pictorial elements. Here either, Zurstrassen does not attempt to make any concrete representation.

However, it is precisely these dark paintings, which continue in changing forms up into the 1990s, that can be seen as a kind of revolt against commercial demand; black is a non-colour, unpleasant and therefore not conform to

market trends. On the other hand, in part through his private links in Andalusia, he finds moderate mysticism and positive connotations in the browns and blacks of Spanish paintings. This nearness to the Spanish painting, especially the "pintura negra", is expressed in a number of works from the years 1991 and 1992 (4). Although brightness only seeks to find its way as a weak glow of light from the depths, or is painted as a smear in these pictures, the dark colours dominate.

While the coloration continues within a spectrum of brown hues, the gloomy layers have been scraped away almost completely, and make place for a chalky, almost monochrome surface of light ochre, additionally marked with fine striations (5). Coded signs appear to play along the edges of the delimited fields, allowing a clear dualism between line and surface to occur for the first time.

At the end of 1995, the character of the paintings changes radically; the coloration lightens and they glow with saturated colour. Zurstrassen vehemently adds coloured loops and whirls over the surface, taking along the colour of the surfaces underneath, or letting their colour shine through in the pores. Sometimes, the richly contrasting colours cascade across the canvas, and then float again as clouds above a light ground, or form a colourful flowerbed, arranged as adjacent tufts of colour (7). Hollow and colour-filled circular forms, or scrawled figures, alternate with one another; a moment that will repeat itself in a changed form later. Yellow and red tones preponderate, but there is no real hierarchy of colours in these joyous works. It remains irrelevant, whether the use of colour here indicates a confrontation with the abstract paintings of Gerhard Richter. Instead Zurstrassen converts Richter's slivery, crystalline application of colour into a softly flowing expression (6).

Antecedents are more likely to be found in Ernst Wilhelm Nay or Hans Hofmann, insofar as this Belgian painter actually is conversant with their works. One should therefore really speak of aesthetic, intellectual and emotional affinities rather than of take-overs.

Reviewing Zurstrassen's paintings since the end of the 1970s, a specific characteristic of the development of the painter can be clearly discovered. One observes a development in a number of phases, whereby each phase is a result of the preceding one, in that the answer to a certain problem in the area of colour or form leads to a renewed question and a new challenge. The development is therefore not smooth and continuous. Instead, it develops in a step-wise fashion out of contradictions, out of an ongoing question and answer game. It is fascinating to observe how Zurstrassen investigates all aspects of a theme or problem in an expanded series of paintings, first testing the theme in small formats, before working them out, instead of simply transferring them onto large-format canvases. These small paintings are in no instance cursory studies; each is a fully worked out pictorial concept. However, some of them are not yet developed in a larger format.

It becomes increasingly apparent not only that his vocabulary of forms and techniques changes with time, but that the transition between the dark and the colourful periods has in the meantime strengthened into the replacement of strong black-white contrasts with a broad wealth of colours. It seems as if Zurstrassen is leaving one experimental field for a new and unknown area, as soon as all the variations have been tried and it appears to become boring. It appears he can only give information about each phase after becoming aware of it in retrospect, that is once it has been completed. Within each phase, the productive



(4) N°1 1992 195x150 cm



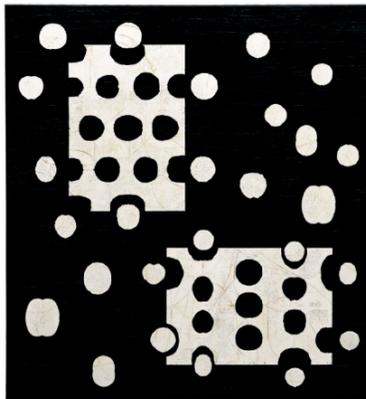
(5) DPI 1992 150x240 cm



(6) #2 1993 125x165 cm



(7) 8/6 1996 290x220 cm



(8) Formes et signes sur fond noir #4 2002 195x180 cm



(9) Jazz #3 2001 23x27 cm

pleasure of experimenting, and a creative frenzy, stand in the way of an arm's length analysis.

If these paintings can be crudely divided into individual series, this could offer the best route to their interpretation.

This exhibition covers his newest works — those that have been created since 2002. Once more, a number of clear breaks can be noted, so that these works can be categorised as belonging to several different series. That Zurstrassen would stake out his very own terrain in painting had already become evident in the previous year; this development does not deny his previous works, but one that nevertheless reaches a totally different level of independence and uniqueness. His new manner of abstraction leaves little room for comparison with younger and certainly not with older colleagues; Zurstrassen's position within the Belgian art world has been relatively unique anyway.

This change becomes apparent in the following: in the paintings from 2002, it can be observed that individual figurative elements of the works are no longer embedded in the overall composition, but that they have become independent (8). Wet colours are used initially for applying the forms, or they emerge from below after several layers of colour have been scraped away. Soon, though, Zurstrassen begins to experiment with the time-honoured collage technique in a small pictorial format. He starts by cutting up older paintings and inserting parts of these in the new composition. These are rather spots than figures, as the square or rounded "foreign bodies" show little formal individuality, while their colourful consistency appears larger and more independent, and this does indeed belong to a different pictorial reality. This gives the overall composition the impression of a collage that has been composed from

several pictures (9). In the pictures of this transitional phase, one can detect reminiscences of the earlier periods.

Zurstrassen has not yet realised every experiment in a larger format. He was more focused on developing a method where, instead of canvas rests, he selects thin paper and tears out small forms in a controlled manner, or straight pieces that are torn along the edge of a ruler, subsequently attaching them in the composition. He started by using newspapers, but soon changed to blank newsprint direct from the roll. Indeed, in contrast to the Cubist pioneers of the collage technique, the textual content did not interest him. Furthermore, it was important to prevent the layers of colour from being dirtied by the printer's ink (10).

He then proceeds to generously paint over wide areas of the pictorial surface, including the attached paper segments, after which the inserted collage elements are carefully removed with tweezers. This working process, which proceeds from the canvas base to the surface of the composition, is reversed and decollages are created. This does not, however, have any relation to the "decollages" of 1960s artists such as Raymond Hains. These works had an action-oriented basis, and their destructive methods of tearing, burning and overpainting the "objets trouvés" was intended as a critique of the consumer society.

Zurstrassen, meanwhile, is fully absorbed in the decollage technique and has developed a number of surprising formulations. His style of painting has changed completely with this new working method. The expressive strokes of the paintbrush have largely disappeared and have been replaced progressively by constructive positioning. His paintings now stand in a totally different context. The basis now lies in "Concrete Art", which does not permit any reference to relationships outside of the composition and on

which Constructive Art had continued to develop, up to the artists of 'Neo-Geo' and the 1980s. Nevertheless, the "Expressionist" Zurstrassen has not exclusively become a "Constructivist", because sufficient space still remains for temperamental, explosive gestures and unpredictable adventure, alongside a meticulous, almost meditative doing, as our remarks will show.

Moreover, Zurstrassen is not a theoretician in the usual sense of the word, but is rather an experimenter who does not eschew any risks. Twice Zurstrassen has since switched between black-and-white (11) and coloured paintings. The majority is two-coloured, whereby it should be mentioned that black is reserved for the uppermost layer. Through a removal of collage parts, deeper, ochre-coloured and bluish shimmering layers are exposed; sometimes these excisions seem like open wounds. The motif adapts to the changes in colours: where the first series was devoted to rounded vegetable-like forms (12), his newest works are "built up" from constructivist squares and rectangles (14).

The rounded forms, as separate elements, float like unconnected islands next to one another on the subsurface, or as an excision in the covering black layer. They present a variety of forms; the removed centre of a folded collage element will become a leaflike or heart-shaped surface at another location. In differentiation to the angular forms, which remain entirely within an abstract sphere, it is not surprising that the rounded forms permit associations to reality; images of a micro- and macroscopic nature appear, as one appears to look simultaneously through a microscope and upwards at a canopy of stars (8). A pictorial focal point is just as absent as a logically definable gradation of the layers; the character of this series displays a 'democratic' side-by-side of equivalued parts (12). Yet, the pictorial structure of

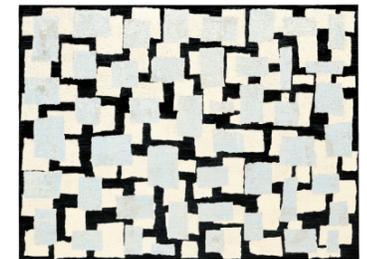
these clearly arranged paintings, too, is complicated and hardly to be traced, especially since a web of visible and covered score marks range over the entire painting. Any reference to reality stops, as soon as straight structural elements appear in these scenes, unless deeper layers seem to be accessible through windows or grates. Then too, though, the actual concern is perspective and space on the surface.

In probably the most complicated colour series (13), Zurstrassen actually combines round and angular forms, and furthermore divides the large pictorial surface into a number of individual paintings, somewhat like the altar-pieces of the Middle Ages, where the stories of the saints were told (14). In addition, individual elements illustrate a variety of pictorial concepts. The smaller formats of this multi-layered composition radiate a blinding intensity of colour. For the first time, Zurstrassen experiments with confrontations between strong orange tones, reds and pinks, and with similarly abrasive green and blue hues (15).

These pictures are preceded by another phase, in which he has once more abandoned himself exclusively to black and white. These large-format paintings are among the most convincing that Zurstrassen has created (16). Irregularly cut rectangles, painted in two different tones of white, one a bluish shimmering cold white and underneath a warm yellowish white, appear to float on a black background. In reality though, the black had at first covered all of the white areas, and it had only lost its predominance, after the collage components had been removed. These paintings become perception traps, because the lower-lying, lighter elements press to the forefront. The eye finally comes to rest at the borders of the finely nuanced white surfaces, sometimes frayed or almost cleanly separated, taking on the appearance of scars left by a plastic surgeon. These white



(10) 14 02 03 2003 40x40 cm



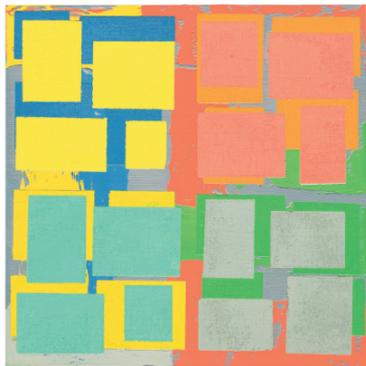
(11) 18 02 03 2003 60x80 cm



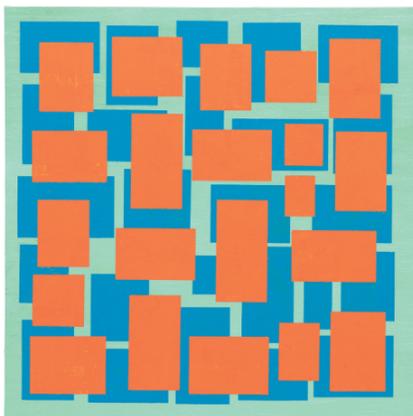
(12) 07 04 03 2003 Ø 200 cm



(13) 09 08 03 2003 100x200 cm



(14) 11 09 03 2003 60x60 cm



(15) 14 10 03 2003 150x150 cm

surfaces have maintained the spontaneous stroke, with which the colour was originally applied. Zurstrassen's white hues gain a quality defined by light, much as with the constructivist light sculptures that Dan Flavin created in spaces, where warm-white, soft-white, daylight and cold-white were differentiated from one another.

Permit me a small digression into daily artistic practice. Without question, Zurstrassen is expertly acquainted with colours and all other materials required for creating a painting. A walkabout through the various rooms, and the individual work and storage areas of the imposing atelier building, not only impresses with the wealth of materials, but above all with how orderly, aesthetically and economically everything is stored, used and reused. Where one room stores factory-fresh colours of the best quality in big plastic containers arranged by colour families, the working atelier will display a colour spectrum of smaller glasses on several tables, mixed to the desired hues and ready for use. In the current phase of his work, Zurstrassen's decision about which colour to use will be made in advance, especially since he has tested these combinations in a small-format. It is normal that he will keep a stock of large primed and unprimed canvases on frames, as well as small-format wooden plates covered with canvas, ready for use. More strange is the collection of cut-up paintings that are stored in drawers, waiting to be reused, or that thin slips of paper, which are saturated with colour and have been removed from new paintings, are stored for drying in an open rack. The roomy atelier, in which a raised gallery and additional rooms surround a central light court, makes it possible to critically assess his works from any distance. Without doubt, Zurstrassen has created the ideal working conditions for himself.

The newest series of colour paintings benefit from Zurstrassen's experience in handling colour effects, and the combination of contrasting colours (17), such as red and blue, or orange and pink, are now much more based on effects of perception, than was the case in his expressionist period. Order and coincidence maintain a balance in a lively rhythm, so that the eye can wander animatedly across surfaces and paths. Since the individual colour elements still contain traces of the removed papers, a skilled craftsman must still carry out any restoration of the paintings. There is nothing that would permit the thought that Zurstrassen has used picture projection or computer processing in creating his works.

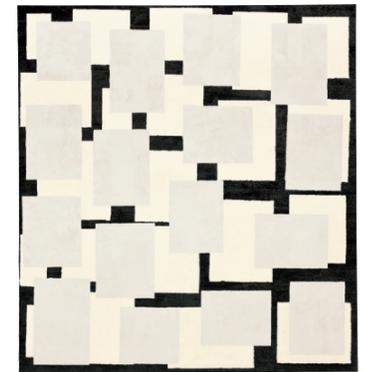
While the freed elements of the pictorial surface nestle next to one another in the larger paintings, the smaller pop-coloured formats often display a greater degree of tactile perception. With his sensitivity for colour, surfaces and composition, it is a coincidence that Zurstrassen has felt an affinity to Henri Matisse for quite some time. It goes without saying that, beyond this, he is also highly interested in Concrete Art, and especially in Piet Mondrian and Joseph Albers. We can consider this last phase of Zurstrassen's paintings as a creative extension of Albers's attempts to achieve the limits of plastic expression of square and line, as well as the limits of two-dimensionally in space expression of a square in a square.

Zurstrassen's work must concern itself with such categorical terms as pictorial centre, sequence, unity and multiplicity, proportion and relationships. Nevertheless, his choice of forms and above all colours is not derived from a theoretical superstructure, even in those paintings that show up to nine or ten combinations on a single canvas. Zurstrassen proceeds to work unburdened, curious and

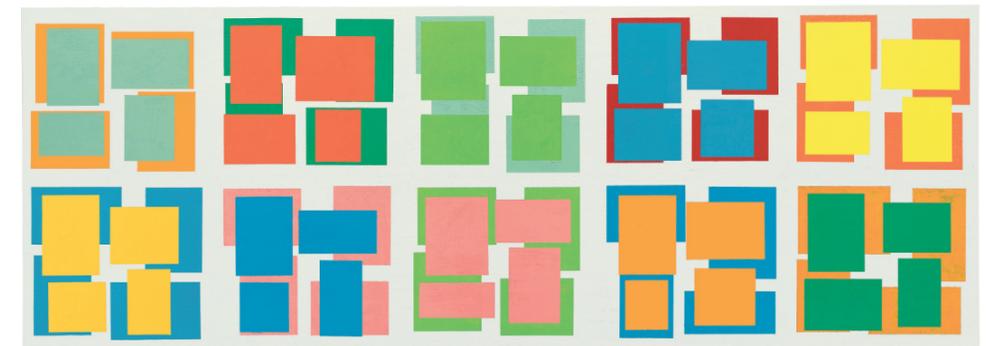
ready for adventure, despite the idea he has in mind and all the knowledge and experience that are in the back of his mind.

The greatest source of energy may indeed come from the tension, which is provided by the risks of this new technique. Much more than the application of colour, it is the process of reduction, the uncovering of hidden parts through decollage, which is full of surprises, since success or failure only become evident at the last moment, when the covered segments appear from below the removed collage parts. It is as if the curtain opens on a new scene, where the painter quite suddenly stands before the final result.

If, in conclusion, one would wish to point out fundamental changes and developments in the work of Yves Zurstrassen, then the first important observation is that he has on the whole changed side within the field of Abstract Art. He has exchanged his Expressionist point of departure in favour of Constructivism. Seen from an emotional point of view, one can speak of a change from darkness to light, and from indecisiveness to greater clarity and conciseness. This includes that the painter has been able to disengage himself from dependencies by turning to more radical concepts, and has achieved greater freedom and autonomy.



(16) 07 03 03 2003 195x180 cm



(17) 28 09 03 2003 150x420 cm