

A year in painting

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In order to understand the work of Yves Zurstrassen, it must be decomposed so as to let in some air. Variations in his paintings notwithstanding, Zurstrassen's work always remains plain, without respiration, frontal. Although in an illusory way it may be seductive, the spectator remains nonetheless alone in front of it, forced to discover his own access to Zurstrassen's work.

The exhibition conceived for Gallery Valérie Bach finds its origin in May 2013 with two paintings, which are not part of the present exhibition. But these two works contain the germs of a number of ideas which eventually will be developed until May 2014 when the final work for this exhibition was finished. A first part of this evolution will be shown at the Kurhaus Museum of Kleve, Germany. The second part is the present exhibition in Brussels.

In May 2013, forms cut out of a piece of paper were no longer placed at the surface of the painting but were attached to its foundation in an « all over » manner. On this foundation Yves Zurstrassen draws large curving lines in white, black or color earth, sometimes also colored geometric forms. Foreground becomes background and the pictural gesture underlying the latter now is being brought to the surface. This inversion opens a number of possibilities which Zurstrassen will explore with the gusto and method which he has used in writing the history and - more particularly - his own history of painting.

During a large number of years the painter has realized decorative motifs for which he found his inspiration both in daily life and in the history of art. He prints them on fine

paper and attaches them on the surface of the canvass, preceding the actual pictorial process. He then tears them loose and thus offers to the spectator the chance of witnessing the process but the act also creates vertigo because the forms become at the same time foundation and surface.

In the present series, paper is no longer cut into a number of motifs but is kept as large folios from which the motifs have been cut out. These are smaller and repetitive, as in wallpaper. It takes 6 to 8 folios to cover a canvas of 2m x 2m, the average format used for this series. Zurstrassen starts with painting the background in dark earth color with a few broad strokes. He then covers it with a more regular thick layer in white or black. On this foundation he attaches the paper folios from which regular small motifs have been cut out. After that, he covers the whole surface in white when the foundation is black, and vice versa, before tearing away the folios. An optic and pictorial game is thus being created in which composition and process are being confounded. In a first series of paintings, the rectangular and regular form of the folios remains unchanged. The background can only be seen through the openings of the motifs and the space between the folios left on purpose. On the surface, Zurstrassen draws large, free-style geometric forms.

The contrast between black and white is thus being enhanced by the opposition between spontaneity and constraint.

13 10 02

Zurstrassen's painting grows like a living organism with multiple ramifications linked together by their moments of invention. The link between the previous series and the one shown in Brussels appears from painting 13 10 02 (*). The work is a step backwards and has been used by the artist in order to better understand the nature of the vistas opened to him by confronting them with older principles. The large paper folios, the small motifs, the colors and the large forms of the foreground disappear and make place for the simplified contrast between black and white and between handwork and ready made. This work made it possible for Yves Zurstrassen to isolate the very basis on which he will found the next phase of his research.

14 05 24

From this confrontation grows the possibility of renewing the approach to the contrast between black and white as well as the transposition in the gesture from brush to hand. The point of departure in his work remains the same, but Zurstrassen replaces the final

phase - brush painting of forms on the surface - by the partial tearing away of the large paper folios. This is being done with quite some violence, as shown by the irregularity of the fringes. The opposition between the regularity of the pictorial gesture which covers the canvas in a uniform way and the spontaneity of the gesture which tears away the paper allows for the juxtaposition of another game of positive/negative to the chromatic one of black vs white. Faced with this complexity, the eye does not know where to start looking, lost as it is in this game of « faux semblant » where background becomes foreground and where what is being added in reality is what is lacking. In this series, the artist has reached a provisory stability.

His paintings can talk to each other by means of the variations which give them more depth. 14 05 24, the last painting of the present exhibition, probably also marks the end of this evolution. Soon, Zurstrassen will discover other links which will open new vistas which the artist will have to decode by new confrontations and successive new risk takings. The apparent simplicity in the painting of Yves Zurstrassen - a few motifs, some white, some black - hides for reasons of diffidence as well as prudence the vastness of his pictorial project in which the internal coherence complicates the access to it. One must continuously look both up- and downstream as well as around the painting in order to get the deeper meaning of it and, perhaps, understand its language.

(*) Zurstrassen entitles his paintings with the date of its accomplishment.



13 10 02, 2013

huile sur toile
230 x 195 cm