

“A vase is just a vase is just a vase”

Paintings as deformed decoration

If there was anything more important to painting at the end of the last century than the declaration of its death, it was perhaps its resurrection. However, the problem it then faced was that it could no longer relate exclusively to its own niche medium, but also had to win a place for itself in a broader discourse, that of contemporary art as a whole.

This situation led to a number of crucial problems. One of them was that from then on there was something odd and limiting about looking at painting. Today, the view of painting seems almost to coincide with the rest of the art amongst which it desperately needs to relate; this is because it has become emphatically contemporary. In my view, the hysterical tendency in present-day art to give an image a contemporary, socially-reflective meaning at all costs, hinders the view of painting in two ways: historically and emotionally. After all, the way of seeing that wafts towards the viewer from contemporary art, which is addicted to context and hungers for meaning, sees to it that art is often viewed in a distinctly a-historical and rationalising way. And since contemporary art has become an inherently multidisciplinary practice, in which painting, like it or not, has to be a fundamental part, this a-historical and rational way of seeing also seeps fundamentally into this niche medium.

And it is precisely these two perceptual traps that the artist Matthias Dornfeld's paintings put into perspective in an intelligent, smart and playfully humorous way, so well-thought-out, in fact, that they appear to reconfirm themselves. In terms of art history references, Dornfeld's paintings are treacherously easy to read and categorise. There are after all not many paintings that *do not* seem to refer to just about every classic motif that has appeared in painting since its birth. In this sense they push spectators, who generally take an a-historical view, almost spontaneously and purely emotionally towards a historical approach. We see portraits, still-lives (mainly vases of flowers), landscapes and so on in almost alarming abundance, rapidly outlined in bright and unsubtle colours, and painted with a childlike brushstroke that appears to negate utterly any form of technical virtuosity. Although Dornfeld's brightly coloured and burlesque-naïve brushwork would seem to violate these traditional painting genres in an almost abstract manner, they nevertheless remain almost immediately recognisable 'by gut feeling' to any viewer, from the smallest child to the greatest connoisseur. They seem to have degenerated into a sort of self-endorsing clichéd visualisation which, in a manner of speaking, is to be found in every child's drawing inspired by this sort of classic painterly motif – and which child's drawing is not? In his work, Dornfeld skilfully erases the distinction between the characteristic 'unicity' of a painted painterly motif (*i.e.* the painter's hand) and its clichéd treatment in any children's drawing.

And yet Matthias Dornfeld (1960, Esslingen) is in the first place concerned with an extreme appropriation of this unicity in these clichéd painterly motifs, but not so much in his physical visual rendering, rather as a painterly mentality in itself. In Dornfeld's work one recognises the 'painter's hand' not in the first place in the physically painted object, but in the mind of the painter. In Dornfeld's case, such classic painterly motifs as portrait, still-life and landscape are deployed purely mentally, as cliché images in themselves, which never

consciously refer to the motifs to which they *appear* to refer. He uses these classic motifs purely as the clichés that they are, as if they were disposable postcards of a banal sunset, a kitsch flower vase or a pin-up babe. Their importance to Dornfeld is as emotional nourishment for his mentality as a painter and in the first place are an ideal excuse for being able above all to continue painting as freely, chaotically and emotionally as possible. The final result thus rarely transcends the cliché, and is entirely subordinate to the mentality with which Dornfeld painted it. In this way he skilfully undermines another cliché: that of the unique brilliance of the painting. To him, his paintings do not appear to be any more than decorations deformed by a child's hand, which could, so to speak, end up both on a nail in a museum and between a magnet and a fridge.

Thus, in a nuanced way, but one in which he truly puts himself into perspective, Dornfeld balances between the imposed 'historical' structure that painting brings with it (the yoke of the classic painterly motifs and historical references) and the intense emotionality of the utterly ('childlike') painterly freedom.

On the other hand, because of his constant juggling with bright colours and highly gesturally applied brushstrokes, Dornfeld's paintings equally appear immediately interpretable as purely expressionistic. But nothing could be further from the truth. His images are expressive, not expressionist. The vividly coloured, thickly painted, childlike visual idiom that Dornfeld uses is here explicitly *not* used as a painterly reflection on any expressionist sub-movement such as Art Brut or, by extension, Naïve Painting, but only, once again, as an emotional excuse to be able mentally and physically to paint as freely as possible. So there is no possibility of an 'analytical' rationalising view of Dornfeld's work, only an emotional-historical one. The viewer immediately 'feels', as it were, the various 'logical' historical references and in this way is almost spontaneously and emotionally compelled to look.

Dornfeld's constant tacking between different historical painterly motifs and -isms in a burlesque, easily readable painting style makes it seem to the viewer as if he is referring to these motifs and -isms, whereas in fact this is precisely not the case. On the contrary, for both the viewer and himself Matthias Dornfeld creates a painterly smokescreen, a series of 'style clouds' as it were. In the case of the viewer it is because, just as he thinks he feels able to play with these various historical stylistic referents as he looks, he is made to face the fact that he is looking at nothing more than an exact, childishly deformed cliché of them.

Conversely, Dornfeld uses his style clouds for exactly the opposite: as a structuring artistic and painterly, historically justifiable excuse to... be able to paint as freely and playfully as possible. Whereby he actually seems to be saying: 'I'm sorry, chaps, but unfortunately it's nothing more than a stupid vase... But I have painted it with total freedom.'

And all the rest is just painting.

Thibaut Verhoeven, July 2014