

TRANSFORMATIONS - on the Ochroid and Sough Series

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by Michael Braunsteiner

Practically all of the works by the Austrian painter Ulrike Stubenböck have a square format, with very few exceptions. Since the late 1990s the artist has been using her own specific method of painting oils on canvas. At first sight her pictures appear non-representational. The colors and sizes vary, dependent on the leitmotif of the respective series (whose individual pieces can be acquired separately). Concurrently with the paintings, Stubenböck also creates graphic works. Her latest brush drawings on paper are now presented to the public for the first time.

Ulrike Stubenböck holds a unique position in Austrian contemporary art. With great consistency her work is dedicated to painting as a process-oriented self-reflexive medium. This attitude reflects a development in Austrian painting which, though rooted in the 1970s and 1980s, is typical especially of the art of the 1990s, represented by artists with an orientation entirely different from that of Stubenböck, such as e.g. Herbert Brandl, Erwin Bohatsch, Hubert Scheibl or Walter Vopava. As early as in 2002 Volker Adolphs recognized that in Stubenböck's art the narrative element, i.e. the actual references to the visible and tangible world, recedes completely into the background in favor of the analytical contemplation of the process of painting itself.¹ The composition of the picture essentially focuses on the fundamental characteristics and effects of the colors.

Ulrike Stubenböck's square canvases are structured in accordance with clear technical principles: the canvas, mounted on a stretcher frame, is first primed with half-chalk ground and covered with an undercoat of oil color. Most of her former paintings, including the *Ochroid Series*, are made up of three pure colors selected in accordance with specific criteria. In her latest works the number of colors may increase to four or even five. Each of the colors is applied on to the canvas with a palette knife, moving from left to right, creating horizontal and initially separated fields of color. These fields all have the same width in the artist's earlier works, while in her new *Ochroid Series* their dimensions differ from each other. With every further stroke of the palette knife the colors are mixed with each other, again and again, until the painting is completed. The act of painting leaves constructively communicating,

interlocking traces. To the viewer every picture is characterized not only by its specific color regime but also by its, more or less obvious, specific speed. Seen from the starting point the outcome is the result of purposeful planning; however, during the process of painting a certain incalculability, the artist's esthetic sense and her knowledge of and feel for the point when the picture is completed, play a vital part.

For Ulrike Stubenböck every painting process is based on the thorough investigation of a specific topic. Since the late 1990s she has completed a number of different series, including the *Inner Series* (1998 to 2003), the *Paynes Series* (2004 to 2007), the *Library Series* (2007 to 2008), the *VH Series* (2009 to 2012), and most recently the *Ochroid Series* (2012).

In her *Paynes Series* Stubenböck explored the color "Paynes Grey," a neutral shade of grey, which appears neither cold nor warm. The *Library Series* was based on analytical-conceptual criteria; the artist analyzed the various colors present in the historical library of the Admont monastery with the help of a color chart, then used the resultant library of colors as the basis for a series of 27 canvases. Her *VH Series* was governed by a similar principle and echoed the extremely reduced color palette used by the Danish painter Vilhelm Hammershøi (1864-1916). In the *Ochroid Series*, her latest, she again, as she has done so often throughout her development as an artist, makes use of observed and remembered colors and of impressions gathered from nature, the "field of resonance for color phenomena."² The color ocher on the one hand refers to nature, and therefore the earth pigment, on the other hand to its presence in practically every painting in existence, either in its pure form or mixed with other colors, clearly identifiable or hardly discernible. The *Ochroid Series* emphasizes the sensual element in Stubenböck's analytical and process-oriented approach to painting. Florian Steininger described this aspect very well in his article for the *Parnass* journal.³

Ulrike Stubenböck frequently expresses her interest in the physics of colors. Fascinated by the behavior of individual pigments, by the structures of specific colors, their qualities and mixtures, she is one of a select few of artists who explore these issues in depth.

In Stubenböck's graphic works, which are exhibited for the first time, the immediate focus of attention is not on the coloring. The new series, which she has named *Sough Series*, currently comprises 35 brush drawings in different shades of grey.

Sough: the sound of murmuring, rustling, acoustic traces left by the wind, over the sea, in the trees. Continuation. Repetition. Regularity. These drawings are traces. Traces of the breeze

inside. That, too. Perhaps. It is not all that clear! There is a mystery about these drawings, something that remains unreadable to the last.

The flat and round brushes have left their monochrome traces on the square pieces of ivory-colored paper. Slow and consistent brushstrokes, applied in rhythmic sequences, create an impression of homogeneity. The structures, the compositions, if you will, of the individual pictures vary considerably. Some drawings resemble the blurred lineament of blank sheet music or a blank exercise book. Drawings with only a few gestural brushstrokes contrast with others crammed with intersecting, overlapping or parallel strokes. Sometimes the lines undulate, snuggling up to each other and subtly overlapping, while in the next picture they may be bundled into powerful sweeping curves, and in yet another the freely drawn strokes, which refuse to subject to any geometrical purpose, produce a crosshatching resembling a web. Each drawing appears to be logically related to both the previous and the next drawing – like the links of a chain, the scenes of a story, the individual images of a moving picture. And they are also related to Stubenböck's painting. The consistent meditative repetitions of the artist's brushstroke can be read as quotations of the palette knife's continuous movement across the canvas. And in both cases the process of creation evokes a new image from the preceding image with every further step – progressing like a movie, until the transformation occurs.

Ulrike Stubenböck's art is not about representationality in any conventional sense, even though in a transformational sense every work of art is a representation. Stubenböck approaches the topic in question by means of her own awareness, broadened through related observations, experiences and/or analyses, then integrates the source content. The process of transformation develops more or less freely. It is governed by the artist's individual systematics, is not subject to any generally applicable principles, and is shaped by a complex series of decisions. Not everyone who looks at the target product (the picture/s) will be able to identify the source product (the topic) in it. Nevertheless: once you know the rules of the game and decide to get involved with Ulrike Stubenböck's art you will be able to comprehend, perceive, be aware of this process both intellectually and sensually.

The roots of these graphic works may be discovered in the history of 20th century art: in distant surrealist trends such as *écriture automatique* (André Breton, Henri Michaux, etc.), or in processes of calligraphic abstraction (Hans Hartung, Mark Tobey, etc.). Given that Stubenböck's artistic intentions deviate from these positions, however, it appears considerably more promising to consider these works under different aspects.

Ulrike Stubenböck's drawings are non-literal translations of her color-focused painting into graphic works. This is true in several respects, as has already been described above. And it is also true of their effect. When you look at these drawings for any length of time the shades of grey, which are created both by the brushwork and by the interrelations between the individual lines, are transformed to colorfulness. It is a phenomenon similar to that experienced when watching black and white television or a movie in black and white: before long we hardly notice that the images are "only" black and white. It is remarkable that in the case of Stubenböck's drawings, notwithstanding their non-figurality, the same effect occurs, removed from any concrete representation.

Color reduction. Monochromy, polychromy, and the interrelation between them. Ulrike Stubenböck has undertaken a thorough investigation of these topics already in her *Paynes Series* and, some years later, in her *VH Series*. As early as around 1900 the painter Vilhelm Hammershøi declared: "I am utterly convinced that a painting has the best effect in terms of its colour the fewer colours there are." ⁴

- 1) Volker Adolphs, *Die Identität des Bildes*, in: *Ulrike Stubenböck: Inner Series*, exhibition catalogue Galerie am Stein, Monika Perzl, Schärding 2002. ISBN 978-3-9500493-3-6.
- 2) Ulrike Stubenböck, *Sich Farben mischen möchten – Der Augenblick des Bildes*, 2005.
- 3) Florian Steininger, *Ulrike Stubenböck, Analytisch-prozessuale Malerei mit Sinnlichkeit*, in: *Parnass 1/2006*.
- 4) Eva-Maria Bechter, *Shades of Hammershøi*, in: *Shades of Hammershøi*, exhibition catalogue Tiroler Landesmuseum Ferdinandeum, Innsbruck 2010. ISBN 978-3-900083-25-0.