

SHADES OF HAMMERSHØI

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by Eva Bechter

“I am utterly convinced that a painting has the best effect in terms of its colour the fewer colours there are.”
Vilhelm Hammershøi

Ulrike Stubenböck's square canvases adhere to a precise system. The system of colour, coincidence and linear handling of the tool. The square, being the shape of the support, is another important constant in her oeuvre – a format disconnected from the image of a landscape with a recognizable horizon, and yet just as free of any association suggesting an upright figure in its midst. Pure shape and pure colour form a symbiosis, calculable by the painter only up to a point. The basis of her works is a palette of exactly defined colours, out of which she combines three at a time. These are applied thickly on to the painting support in horizontal tracks, and then blended together. In what resembles a meditative process they are mixed with each other, using a palette knife, always from left to right in one single move – failure is implied. If the result does not work all the effort is inevitably lost: no correction is possible. Thus, in terms of its precise attitude and its scientific canon of ideas painting is advanced to a final point, yet not abandoned there to the last – an investigation implying the “crisis of panel painting”. What kind of content could still be communicated by this medium today, after painting has died several deaths in the 20th century? In her investigation Ulrike Stubenböck finds an original analytical approach to painting – a quiet, serene result on the basis of lofty spaces of colour, yet without ever lapsing into a radicalness comparable to that of Ad Reinhardt's *Black Paintings*. The British art critic David Sylvester has aptly described the final point in terms of colour in Ad Reinhardt's series: “Black was a sacred colour for the Abstract Expressionists, it was their lapis lazuli; they made a mystique of it, partly perhaps because of its austerity, partly perhaps because there was something splendidly macho in being able to produce a good strong black.”

This macho attitude is quite alien to Stubenböck. Her relation to colour is rooted in actual observation – with both nature and art as her anchors. It was quite by chance that she became aware of the Danish artist Vilhelm Hammershøi: a painter living and working around 1900,

whose oeuvre is characterized by a subtle, sensitive investigation into the medium of painting in terms of the use of colour. Admittedly, the attempt to compare Vilhelm Hammershøi's empty rooms submerged in a diffused light with Ulrike Stubenböck's analytical, abstract spaces of colour may at first appear rather daring. Some one hundred years lie between these two attitudes, yet they have one essential characteristic in common: a focus on a limited palette of colours, and on lines. "What makes me choose a motif are...the lines, what I like to call the architectural content of an image. And then there's the light, of course." (Hammershøi)

Whereas lines are understood as carved tracks in Stubenböck's paintings, Hammershøi's lines are revealed in cave-mouth-like doors, edges of tables, tablecloths and window frames. In many of his pictures the viewer is allowed a glimpse of the painter's spacious apartment at Strandgade 30 in Copenhagen, a sparsely furnished residence where Hammershøi had the walls painted grey, the doors painted white and the wooden floor stained dark brown. The half-open doors permit a look into the depth of the rooms, yet their image reminds the viewers that they are intruding upon the privacy of a man who prefers clarity and has removed any trinkets and knickknacks from his personal environment. The often anonymising depiction of his wife in back profile enhances this involuntary voyeurism. The viewers identify themselves with the figure, seem to look out of her eyes (which are not visible) or to nearly touch her, in those cases where Hammershøi places her so far into the foreground that the picture does not even show her legs. Caspar David Friedrich also uses the motif of a figure viewed from the back in his Romantic works. His figures look upon a majestic nature, revealed to the viewer in all its splendour and immensity. Hammershøi's works lack this sublime quality. Here the figure viewed from the back provides an intimate entrance to a small-format, private picture. The viewer becomes an intruder, so to speak, who, from this involuntary perspective, cannot but become aware of a certain ghostlike quality of the scenery. The paintings radiate a stillness, the colouring used by Hammershøi making them appear to be frozen in a certain blurredness. From outside light enters the familiar room, projecting cones of light on to the wall and illuminating dust motes in the air. Hammershøi undertakes an artistic "tour de force" here. The constant repetition in his selection of motifs evidences that the painter keeps tackling the same issues over and over again: light in its tonality, and blurredness in painting. Besides the deliberately reduced palette of colours, this ostensibly serial approach is another aspect linking Hammershøi to Ulrike Stubenböck's work.

For Ulrich Greiner, Hammershøi's fascination lies in the complete opposition of his works to the present-day world in all respects: "The world we live in is loud and brightly coloured. Hammershøi shows us a world almost devoid of colour. There is no red, no blue, no green, no

yellow, only a pink with a greyish tinge (the dusky pink of a dying era), a dying blue (...*bleu mourant*...), a brownish green, and a yellow appearing only in the light coming in through the windows and illuminating the gilded picture frames. Nor are there any sharp contrasts. The images appear to be painted on velvet, with slightly blurred outlines, transitions like a shadow play in September light.” (in: DieZEIT, 2008) Greiner’s statement could equally well be used to describe the concept underlying Ulrike Stubenböck’s paintings. Given its ostensibly simple technique and the deliberately employed serial concept, her painting is also committed to stillness and meditation, and therefore in opposition to the prevailing “clamour” of the brightly coloured everyday world. Stubenböck has meticulously verified the colours she uses in her series *Shades of Hammershøi* by comparing them with the Danish painter’s originals; a tribute to a master of a reduced range of colours, and a kindred spirit as an artist. Rainer Maria Rilke’s statement from around 1905 aptly describes the kinship between these two artistic approaches, both so perfectly suited for playing with light in painting: “...(Hammershøi’s) work is long and slow, and at whichever moment one apprehends it, it will offer plentiful reasons to speak of what is important and essential in art.”