

Out of this world – MATERIAL TRIVIAL *On the construction of reality* *in the work of Wolfgang Rohloff*

The illusion could hardly be greater. And yet everything that is seen is entirely real. Whether stencilled and shortened, opulently adorned with perfectly rendered or patterned fabric, painted with spatial presence and yet tangibly structured, clearly contoured or fragmented and free flowing in a fragile net of lines: Colours and forms always find their space, revealing themselves with delicate surfaces between precise applications of colour, a seemingly pictorial texture, and a subtly construed (image) reality. Reality animates every work, whether set figuratively or as the real imprint of an existing structure. "The image is a staged offer of conversation for the senses", open to disagreements and free for individual interpretations, Wolfgang Rohloff noted in 2004.

No, these images are not trivial, as the title of the present overview suggests. What is trivial is only the material brought into play here, at least if one observes it superficially as a cheap substitute for expensive fur, finely wrought gold brocade or other substances used for clothing or decoration. These materials have served the tastes of the masses for generations, while also shaping them. Painting, spraying, cutting, forming, mounting, transferring with sophisticated techniques: the artist shrewdly tracks down the details of everyday life, as they appear in the patterns of certain textiles and manifest themselves in clichéd images. Almost entirely in passing, he presents just

how encompassing painting, in combination with the material expression of resolute certainties, can be – at once visual knowledge and transformation.

From classical panel painting and material montages to frame-exploding spatial image objects, the so-called "shaped canvases", boundaries and boundary crossings are meticulously investigated. The spectrum of the artist's modes of expression reaches from graphically clear, carefully contoured paintings of strong colour on canvas, and delicate techniques of printing with finely nuanced colour, to methods of frottage and décollage. All of them play with the illusion of painting as a spatial-material event. Stencils enable the construction of things with the same form, each according to the image's object and statement. Relief structures, such as fitted fragments, indentations, or relief traces, serve particular purposes. Methodical changes are achieved in a continuous, open work process, leading, as in the current "line field images", to figures that are almost abstract. But there is a way back to figure or landscape in the end, a way that is indicated as a found form. Lines and graphic abbreviations constitute the image; with their strikingly individual colour structure they create space on the large canvases, and at the same time they concretise the constructive and destructive changes characteristic of collage and décollage. Wolfgang Rohloff compares the method of this current work series

Eröffnung der Galerie Potsdamer Berlin
– Ausstellung „Fred Thieler“
(Wolfgang Rohloff, Peter P. J. Sohn,
Will Grohmann)

Opening of Gallery Potsdamer Berlin
– Exhibition: "Fred Thieler"
(Wolfgang Rohloff, Peter P.J. Sohn,
Will Grohmann)



with the “combine paintings” formerly developed by Robert Rauschenberg. What shows itself as an image object or as a relief-like structure is no more and no less than the continuation of the stringent image immanent thought of a realist, one who finds the adequate means of expression for each depicted form. Painting, designing, bending, forming and deforming are mutual processes that lead to both intended insights and unforeseen discoveries.

At the beginning of the artist's career the father of Pop Art stood for the first image ideas. “Pop Art would have completely passed Berlin by, had a painter called Wolfgang Rohloff not begun, shortly after the middle of the 1960's, to place trivial objects in large format in the image”, wrote Lucie Schauer in 1980 on the occasion of a solo exhibition of the artist's work in the Neue Berliner Kunstverein. With his textile images, material compositions, montages, cut-outs and picture objects, the artist had found his own highly idiosyncratic and authentic positions for exploring reality in painting well before then. Image citations from the world of commodities, consumption and leisure, as well as from the well-known protagonists of modern art, from Picasso to Cézanne, call into question not only the exemplary norms and clichés of art and society, but further develop artistic methods. Only at second glance, in the complex, changing effects of colour, surface, material and technique – each a specific means of expression – does the game of deception between image and impression reveal itself as a perfect symbiosis of various levels of reality and visual excitement. The structures of Wolfgang Rohloff's oversize paintings, which sometimes burst the boundaries of panel painting, are at once true to life and yet appear strange in their new garb. Classic still life paintings, landscapes, portraits, mutants or doppelgänger from the history of art mutate into hybrid beings that are as surreal as they are real, hovering between irony and poetry, dreams and the grotesque.

Traditional genres become the stomping grounds of dramatically imitative materials, which seem to convey the performances to a parallel world, or to a consistency which leads even further. In the external form, they continue nevertheless to carry their own lives with them, while the interior drawing or the imprinted ornament evokes patterns of movement that – by depicting soft skin, rigid walls, strange contrasts of colour – are never seen. In short:

foreign impressions are superimposed, thwarting what is clearly seen and recognised. A double metamorphosis forces the eye out of the image and back through the material, compelling it to look – according to that materiality – into a trivial world of illusion: A “salto mortale” that “doubly emphasises [the] character of illusion”, as Karl Ruherberg aptly describes Wolfgang Rohloff's incisive, analytic creations.¹

Influences of Pop Art, with representatives like Richard Hamilton, Richard Lindner, Roy Lichtenstein or Robert Rauschenberg, seem to have left behind a greater impression in the 1960's than, for example, Fred Thieler, a staunch representative of abstract painting under whom Rohloff studied as a master student, acquiring all the techniques and refinements of painting. And yet, the invitation to the former teacher to attend the opening exhibition of the “Gallery Potsdamer Berlin”, founded by Wolfgang Rohloff and his colleague Peter P. J. Sohn (a thrilling occasion with Will Grohmann as opening speaker), was sent not merely because of the high profile of this well known representative. It can also be understood as a homage to that generation of fathers that freed painting from inherited forms, norms and content, and shifted it into the focal point of their creative work – as an “inquiring action (forschendes Tun)”² and message in itself.

This school of the most varying abstract tendencies leads not least to a rupture in objective painting, to a newly discovered “Principle Realism” following on from Pop Art and Neo Dada: critical, political, striking, open for a new society. “The spontaneous entry of the informal is brought under an intellectual control in the student generation”, Katrin Sello writes of Wolfgang Rohloff's early works, exhibited in 1966 in the Gallery Potsdamer: “In Rohloff's works, Thieler's dynamic flow solidifies itself in definite forms; but in their abundant curves and sinuous contours, they still possess so much tension that they seem to force their way out of the image frames.”³

The shortening of perfectly modulated female body parts by taut corsages, and their masculine counterparts in the form of precisely cut shirts folded with stiff collars, find their equivalents in clearly contoured surfaces of strong colour that individually define exact zones in space. Elsewhere pieces of clothing emerge from the ground of the image in soft-focus, with the finest nuances of monochrome

coloration. It is as though real shirts or hats had left behind imprints of light and shadow zones on just those materials from which they are cut – masterful Trompe-l'oeils of the present.

With subtle humour Rohloff sets selected “image carriers” of an idyll of affluence in scene, plays with image and copy, with surface and the surrounding space between illusion and reality. A quiet irony reveals itself in his perfectly patterned, expressive textiles, in light of these costume dreams, and in the societal roles that they so clearly demarcate. The parade of shoes and hats speaks not least of uniformity and rigid conformity. Finding themselves in unison, stacked next to one other and on top of each other, they seem, like a people’s armies typified, to have lost all inclination to any individuality, even in their free time. This points, totally inconspicuously, like the hallmark of a stencilled Mao portrait on the blue grey shirt collar, tone on tone, to the political dimension of the mass, as well as to the power of its images.

Nothing happens by chance in these works. Even when – as in a series of landscape motifs from the 1990’s – the colour seems to solidify, like a molten substance flowing in distinct colour domains, the field is nevertheless always already delimited: flexible borders made from cables and bands of foam decelerate the process, surround it, and steer it in a pre-determined direction. The furrowing of a “hay churner” is the theme of a representation of the time between the 1980’s and 90’s. The landscape of the Mark Brandenburg is shown in a series of motifs that not only explicitly recalls the expressive gesture and canon of motifs of earlier generations of artists. With the work in large format from 1989, “Painter in the Mark Brandenburg” (Maler in der Mark Brandenburg), Rohloff cites Vincent van Gogh, but not the original work – “Wheatfield with Crows” – which came into

being just under 100 years earlier. Instead a cinema scene, one made suitable for the mass public, is cited. Kirk Douglas is a painter at the easel, encircled by black birds on the outskirts of a grain field. Plastic tubes and other horizontal, spatial lines lay themselves like thickly painted brush strokes over the image, interweaving it with space and reality.

Wolfgang Rohloff paints with material – real or as a structural surface stimulus and direct “imitation of reality”⁴, as he formulated it in 1977. He has continued working this way until today. Colour “décollages” are currently coming into being from freely delineated structures; interweaving into emblematic striations, they carry the germ of landscapes within them; they let nature appear or come to find embodied, figurative forms. In a long, playful enquiry into the concentration and dispersal of colour structures, new impulses reveal themselves. Lines join contours, pathways and forms, lead to figures or occupy and animate the image space as floating elements – like molecules of a continuous process of transformation. This allows colour and structure to take on form: a constant metamorphosis of contrasts, proximity and distance, that always leads into the image and from there beyond it, back to the world. An incessant shifting of focus, and an examination of the details apparent to the eye, accompany the creation and reception processes of these works.

“I am of the opinion that an image is more real when it is made out of pieces of the real world”, Robert Rauschenberg commented in 1962 in a frequently cited statement. He then added: “Painting refers to both – to art and life (...); I try to operate between both.” Wolfgang Rohloff has consistently developed this view with his own individual “combine paintings”, transforming his reality into works of fiction and fact – works that are as coherent as they are striking, brought into being from a cognitive process, from spirited resistance, and from a delight in colour and material.

BIRGIT MÖCKEL

¹ Karl Ruhrberg, in: Wolfgang Rohloff. Stoffmontagen, Frottagen, Objekte, Ausst.kat. Galerie Thomas Wagner, Berlin 1977, o.S.

² Ferdinand Ullrich: Kunst des Westens 1945–1960, Kunstaussstellung der Ruhrfestspiele Recklinghausen 1996, S. 224

³ Katrin Sello: Sphärische Perspektiven. Wolfgang Rohloff in der Galerie Potsdamer, in: Der Tagesspiegel, 27.07.1966

⁴ Wolfgang Rohloff, in: Heinz Ohff: Poesie aus Stoff und Foto. Wolfgang Rohloff, in: Der Tagesspiegel, 03.09.1977