

## TACTILE AND PATIENCE CONCENTRATIONS AND OPENINGS

by Konrad Bitterli

“It’s a matter of delaying the first glance as long as possible. Delaying the first glance so long that it is more than just a glance, it becomes a contemplation, a conception or even a state.”

Giacomo Santiago Rogado

### Encountering painting

In the consideration of his works one passes directly from the ostensive to the general, from the individual painting to the fundamental reflection about the mechanisms of the perception of visual art and thus to the question: How does painting encounter me?(1)

I first encountered the series *Patience and Tactile* in the autumn of 2008 in Giacomo Santiago Rogado’s studio, an unusual place, since one tends to look at art in the cleared ‘white cube’ of a gallery.(2) In a seminal essay, Brian O’Doherty shows how the consideration and evaluation of art is dependent on its presentation, on the context of its ‘exhibition’. The author dismisses ideas of pure seeing by pointing out that exhibiting, like the place of the exhibition, is linked with ideologies and value judgments. Comparable differences may probably also be applied to the place of exhibition and production, to public and private presentation: the studio is the place in which art comes into being – before its public display. But there are other factors again which determine access to Rogado’s visually challenging work, namely light and space.

The frontal view of the evenly lit canvas proves to be the unexamined convention of all consideration of art. The ideal viewpoint with a mid-picture perspective is also reflected in the manner of reproduction in book publications, which is still further removed from the concrete experience of seeing by shifts in scale. Conventions of perception which do not correspond to direct contemplation have insidiously established themselves. And even in the museum cube, for reasons of architecture and presentation, one does not necessarily encounter a painting in a frontal manner. Furthermore, the perception of individual works depends on thematic or stylistic contexts. Nevertheless one tries repeatedly, without reflection, to place oneself in the supposedly ideal viewing position – and is then surprised by its unexpected size and direct expression. Light also makes a significant contribution as a precondition for seeing, because art can only unfold its sensual effect in appropriate light conditions. However, these are constantly changing – even in a museum in which the most up-to-date lighting technology ensures that ideal lighting conditions are simulated, or changes in the light are neutralised. In Rogado’s painting, play with light becomes crucial to the visual dynamic and aesthetic appeal.

## Studio

Rogado's studio presents itself to me as a generous, light-drenched space, a classic hangar that looks like a relic from some time long gone. As I enter, my eye falls immediately on the row of windows opposite me and out into the open, looking out on an abandoned industrial landscape. Only then do I notice the canvases arranged in an orderly fashion along the side walls. Between concrete posts they stand alone or in pairs, leaning against a white brick wall on small wooden blocks, or hanging on the wall to be viewed. The dimensions of the space make it possible to grasp the works at a single glance. But above all they allow the viewer to assume not only an intellectual but also a physical detachment from each individual work, to examine it both from a distance and from close to, to approach it from different perspectives and consider each individual work both in the context of previous works and in their respective series. For once the encounter in the studio comes close to the experience in the gallery - and yet it is fundamentally different, since here everything is still tangibly in flux, it lacks the validity of the museum presentation. The spatial openness and simultaneous juxtaposition of different works permit unfamiliar motions of seeing, which may come close to an 'authentic' view, while in institutional presentations it tends to be channelled, because of museum hierarchies and architectural structures, by fixed suites of galleries and sightlines.

The studio is a working space: almost slightly lost in the middle of the space, the artist has arranged a number of tables into a manageable working situation. On it, apart from the obligatory painting materials - pens, pigments, brushes - are an old grandfather clock, books, notes, sketches, paint samples... They make it clear that this does not simply represent the place of painterly execution, but the place of intellectual development. The industrial architecture, with its vastness, its sober atmosphere and its cool skylighting, offers the artist ideal conditions for his precise work, just as it creates intellectual space for reflection on the emerging work - inwards, isolation and concentration, outwards intellectual openness, the view outside. And precisely this tangible polarity is reflected in the oeuvre - as the simultaneity of a hermetics of autonomous pictorial research on the one hand and permanent openness to the world on the other.

## Picturing an exhibition

In his solo exhibition in Museum of Art Lucerne, with *Patience* and *Tactile*, Giacomo Santiago Rogado is showing two current groups of works as closed ensembles in successive exhibition rooms and because of his deliberate self-limitation achieves the greatest possible concentration on the painting or the act of seeing.

*Tactile* - concerning the sense of touch - is the title which, with quiet irony, he gives to the five-part group of works, since as the artist he is the only one who physically touches the canvas. Three one-part, one two-part and one three-part painting are based on the same picture format or the same fundamental structure, although in terms of colour they undergo refined variations. The starting-point is a colour gradient in acrylic paint, which runs in parallel, 7.5-centimetre wide vertical strips, changing colour from the bottom to the top edge of the painting. In the three-part *Tactile 1* he moves from gleaming white via the most delicate grey tones to black and on into an intense rust-red, while the untreated, pale canvas appears in the strips in between. (3) Over this strict all-

over pattern the artist lays a second layer of paint: splayed triangles of intense colour with rounded ends in a vertical arrangement, applied in classic oil paint. The same colours are repeated along the diagonals, while in the verticals they make visible an intriguing zigzag movement of about 7.5 centimetres wide, effectively as a meandering overlay over the regular banding.

Rogado's pictorial arrangement follows strict rules, the creation process is to some extent the consistent translation of an already formulated pictorial concept. Tactile, because of its structure and systematic nature, seems to suggest a rather static pictorial effect – but far from it! The painting can be visually overwhelming, as a viewer one can barely escape its staccato rhythms of colour and form. At the same time one's own perception is not simply activated, the act of seeing is, so to speak, over-stretched. But the massive dynamism of the paintings depends not least on the way in which one meets the painting. The hanging in the Lucerne Museum is conceived in such a way that some paintings are always visible frontally, and others in sideways foreshortening. And precisely between the different viewing positions exciting visual shifts relax, the surfaces begin to breathe, the pictures begin to develop a true life of their own.

From a frontal perspective, according to one's distance from the picture, the strict pictorial structure with its overarching colour gradient and banding comes to the fore, and begins, as one approaches, to lose focus and to drift apart, as if to re-form, through the fact that individual bands of colour seem to enter the space as floating strips. The static nature of the pictorial structure begins to dissolve, the picture surface seems to vibrate visually. Comparable elements occur in the foreshortened side view: the strict system is never really perceptible, as the bands of untreated canvas always retreat from the intense colour of the gradient, while the latter come into the foreground because of their gleaming force. From this perspective the pictorial arrangement, in the form of wavy lines, seems to be constantly moving, spreading and intensifying into an undulating symphony of colour.

These permutations and diverse spatial illusions, evoked as perceptual phenomena, are firmly inscribed within the pictorial structure in the series *Patience* in the next exhibition space. *Patience* is also based on colour gradients, but these enclose an onion-shaped 'opening' at the centre of the picture. Spreading from one picture to the next, the bands stretch to the left or right edge. The flat painting is already structurally arranged as a spatial swelling. If *Tactile* works as a closed ensemble, *Patience* resolutely distracts the perception and opens up a fundamentally different reading in the following picture. Here, rather than the delicate monochrome surface at the centre of the picture, the artist has created a 'real' opening, by providing a 'view' of a black-and-white cloud formation. The pictorial opening, created in an old-fashioned-looking blurring technique in oil on a dense white ground (4) at first glance recalls an academic drawing in a monumental format: *Affinity*◇ uses the centuries-old convention of painting as a 'window' on the world. Here Rogado evokes, in the centre of a non-figurative, strictly constructed pictorial form, something intangible and unstructured, and confronts an 'antiquated' language of drawing with modernist traditions. By so doing, is he not calling his own artistic attitude into question? At any rate, he is thwarting all possible expectations of unity of pictorial language and picture. He consistently continues this thwarting strategy in the exhibition with *Lucia*◇, another monumental figurative painting. In the same old-fashioned style it depicts a young woman with a dreamy expression and a concentrated hand-gesture. Here a patch of cloud in place of a waistcoat drags the girl from her self-centered intimacy, not only opening up, in an almost Surrealist manner, a second pictorial space, but completely deconstructing the idea of concentration and interiority as suggested by the pictorial motif. In his exhibition Rogado makes expectations of a closed presentation run just as deliberately and radically into the open, into uncertainty, just as he breaks apart the coherence of the pictorial language and the unity of the picture in the individual work: artistic openings everywhere!

### Pictorial dispute – most intimate

The attempt to establish Rogado's work as formal research must, with the involvement of figurative modes of representation, make way for a precise destabilisation. The work opens up formally, it does not only vibrate visually, but starts to irritate intellectually. It is this irritation, the subtle play with different pictorial traditions and modes that determine the core of his work.

On closer analysis modernity appears once again as a rich collection of forms, in that the constructive traditions in particular offer the greatest variety of models and patterns which Rogado subjects to a consistently contrary reading. The visual games of Op Art serve as his most important picture sources. Admittedly, post-war art referred back to the achievements of the pioneers with their unshakable faith in the overcoming of traditional ideas of art and their vision of a renewal of culture and the realm of experience, but in the 1950s utopian power made way for increasingly formal games, a superficial tickling of the optic nerves. Later scorned for this 'superficiality', Op Art is now undergoing a revival and – probably not least because of comparable visual games in the digital pictorial world – enjoying re-evaluation in the present day. But how does an artist like Giacomo Santiago Rogado (b. 1979), come to take on such a loaded tradition? Is it one of these post-modern games with the seductive pictorial solutions of the past, or should this recourse rather be seen as a biting commentary on the dreadful positivism of the post-war generation? The simultaneous use of other pictorial traditions and languages as taught for centuries at academies, and which modern art resolutely resisted, may militate against such interpretations. Applied in oil on canvas in a curious blurring technique, works such as *Lucia* or *Weiß & Prosa* (White & Prose) resemble academic studies, or even more than that: they seem – an iniquitous comparison – even to recall mass-produced tourist portraits and thus to deny any claim to art. It is hard to think of any greater opposition than that between academic tradition and the radical nature of modern art, even if in its late form modern art also solidified into a compulsory canon. And yet this is fundamentally a matter of irreconcilable artistic positions, which raises the question of whether Rogado's works are pursuing an artistic discourse about modern art, its consequences and its ideological evaluations – and doing so in the form of pure painting. So is this a pictorial dispute between opposite artistic views? This question, however, is undercut by the origin of the motifs, which are mostly taken from photographic models. That is to say, the figurative pictorial elements are – unlike academic studies – not developed in front of the motif, but based on already existing pictures from the 1930s and 1940s, which explains their antiquated appearance and of course leaves room for further interpretations and speculations. Rogado does use pictorial models, albeit not ones in which friction with reality and the contemporary world is made apparent, but which are historical per se and thus distanced from the present. Because of the absent context and the precise selection of extraordinarily concentrated elements and self-referential gestures the paintings seem to preserve their deepest secret, their own inner magic. Or in other words: the potential for narratives is suppressed in the painting, and an anecdotal reading is made largely impossible.

Although the artist translates the photographic models to oil painting, in its appearance this tends rather to resemble charcoal studies, a fundamental technique of artistic craft, which further extends subtle discourse concerning the origin of paintings by means of the different application of traditional pictorial genres, their evaluations in the translation into a different medium or the renewal of long-abandoned pictorial forms in their gentle transformation. With such material and intellectual shifts, Rogado opens up further layers for the reading of pictures, by borrowing on postmodern strategies and refusing to claim any inherent ground for painting. Instead he takes as his premise what media theorist Peter Weibel pithily said of the art of the 1990s, that the reason for a picture is

already a picture.(5) Even that most immediate of arts, abstract painting, experiences a surprising opening to the world, less in the sense of mimesis than referring to a complex visuality such as that made globally available through the present-day media. Thus it is a secondary matter to Rogado whether his picture sources come from painting or from photography, whether it is a question of figurative or abstract traditions or even the combination of different artistic attitudes. It is more a matter of a simultaneous access of all possible pictorial worlds, the potential for combinatorics and the subsequent integration of individual pictorial fragments from past and present into a personal, highly individual artistic cosmos, shaped by a fundamental movement of seeking and seeing and a muted emotionality entirely appropriate to the art of the present day.(6) And similarly Rogado's work precisely lacks the obvious, playful and ironic fracture that the generation of postmodernism made its own. It is a creation of fine differences and quiet nuances. And thus the artist formulates the same claim in his paintings, whether they be figurative or abstract, he seeks the same inner concentration and seriousness that essentially distinguish his figures. Gently but firmly he investigates the properties and categories of the image – not in the sense of a theoretical discourse, but actually as painting! Against the background of the most complete availability of multimedia data Giacomo Santiago Rogado examines and interrogates the possibilities of his own pictorial concepts and from an attitude of permanent questioning develops an unmistakable painting which, precisely in its internal contradictions, speaks of today's world. Beyond nostalgic flights from the world, in his work he performs a pictorial research that stimulates the optic nerves and lastingly irritates the mind.

#### Postscriptum

For Giacomo Santiago Rogado, his studio is not only a place of work, but the symbol of an artistic attitude, in which concentration on art as an autonomous creation of form is combined with the gaze out of the window – into a world that stands for a past age and yet betokens the present.

## Notes

- (1) Cf. Giacomo Santiago Rogado. *Das Eine ohne das Andere. Von der Dekonstruktion einer Wahrnehmung*, Eigenverlag, 2004.
- (2) Brian O'Doherty. *Inside the White Cube*. In *der weissen Zelle*, Berlin: Merve, 1996.
- (3) The artist uses different manufactures and qualities of canvas. As the untreated canvas often remains visible, it has a not inconsiderable influence on the colour effect of the painting.
- (4) This is a dense white grounding, over which Rogado applies a layer of black oil paint, from which, in the aforementioned blurring technique, a basically subtractive process, he forms the clouds
- (5) Cf. Peter Weibel. *Pittura/Immedia. Malerei in den 90er Jahren*. Neue Galerie Graz, 1995. 'So it is not what is to be seen behind the picture, not how do we see the picture itself, what is the picture, but thirdly, that is the question of today, how do we slip inside the picture. The question of sliding into the picture is not only a technical one [...], but this question of slipping derives from the fact that pictures as a whole have for a long time been slipping from one into the other. This question is in fact based on the discovery that the reason for a picture is already itself a picture.'(p. 17).
- (6) Comparable ways of accessing constructive traditions are practised by a series of young artists, such as Tomma Abts, Matthias Bitzer, Bernd Ribbeck or Jens Wolf, who have been brought together under the heading of 'Neue Geometrie': 'The artists subsumed under Neue Geometrie or Neo-Formalism work – in painting, mural, sculpture and drawing – on structures which, formed from clear lines or contours, are condensed into dynamic force-fields. Their works visualise the transition from object and space and beyond this function as an interface between décor, a decorative aspect, and severity, the formal aspect of the material.'(Gregor Jansen. *Les visages de la Mademoiselle Demimonde*. Städtische Galerie, Nordhorn, 2007, unpag.)

## Author

Konrad Bitterli is a curator at Kunstmuseum St. Gallen, where he has been responsible for, amongst other things, a series of exhibitions of contemporary painting, including monographic presentations by Mary Heilmann, Jessica Stockholder, Jonathan Lasker, David Reed, Raoul de Keyser, Luc Tuymans and Franz Ackermann.