

Lydia Mammes: Painting

What one sees in the images created by Lydia Mammes is painting, and nothing else. These pictures are abstract in the sense that they do not evoke any identifiable object. The artist, however, is not simply concerned with the pure and simple concretion of the means of painting: the paint, its structure and its application. Lydia Mammes could be said to avoid both extremes: an image that is simply a likeness breaking through a layer of paint on the one hand, and an analytic approach that is concerned solely with investigating paint and the materials and phenomena of ‘the pictorial’ on the other. Her painting occupies a narrow strip of territory between these two possibilities: a pictorial quality depending on the recognition of things and situations on the one hand, and the assertion of a perfect autonomy for the image on the other. This painterly in-between space may not be so easy to comprehend, but the paintings’ processual character is immediately apparent. These paintings are constructed in multiple layers, with the generating, negation and transformation of visual material as different aspects of the same process. At the same time, the pictures expose the story of their own origins; to some extent, they permit us a glimpse of their history.

In a large number of artworks from past years, the layering of colours, surfaces, forms and movements conveys itself to us in at least two – categorically different – ways. For one thing, Mammes works primarily in low-viscosity glazes, which allow the layers of paint beneath to show through. In addition to creating new ways of combining different paints, this method constantly gives the paintings a curious impression of depth. On the other hand, these upper layers are often not applied across the *whole* of the picture’s surface; instead, they terminate at varying distances from the pictures’ edges, leaving the deeper-lying levels exposed. In some of her pictures – such as *Ohne Titel* (Untitled, 2013, Fig.) a remarkable number of diverse colours appear in these zones. The centre of this picture (in quadratic format) is dominated by a light yellow and beige-coloured layer of overpainting, but the edges of the picture, to either side, exhibit brilliant orange alongside deep purple, brown, yellow, beige and other colours. One might almost think that the attractive features of the painting had shifted out to its edges. Closer inspection, however, shows the central part of the picture to be no less eventful; as one looks, more and more of the horizontal flow of streaks of colour are seen beneath the lighter shades. At the sides, the streaks of colour are seen openly: but in the centre, they appear as if submerged, tied into a fluid continuum that can be perceived in a ‘delayed’ way.

Clarity and vagueness, sharp distinctions and blurring, immediacy and temporal extension – these paired terms might provide an approximate verbal description of the vivid complexity of these pictures. We must bear in mind, however, that these opposites – which, in an analysis, are of necessity sharply distinguished from one another – merge into each other, and are interwoven, within the pictures themselves. Possibly, the degree of crystallisation of these painterly opposing poles in Mamme's paintings could be said to depend above all upon the point at which the artist concludes – or possibly breaks off – this painterly layering and growth process. In her oeuvre, we encounter artworks in which the synthesis of the image to form a whole appears to be at an advanced stage; in others, as described above, one sees various different intervening stages. The second statement is true of another picture painted in 2013, more than two-thirds of which is covered with a light blue surface form (Fig.) In the upper part of the picture, this light blue appears diffuse – in places, it appears to be on the point of dissolving – but this surface ends with a largely clear, gently curving edge in parallel with the picture's lower edge. In contrast to the relatively wavering spatial parameters above, the lower half of the picture shows a high degree of differentiation. Without aiming to give the impression of representationality, the picture, in this case, tends towards a *graspable* quality that approaches the representational. This applies firstly to the expanse of blue itself, which curves and appears to float against a multicoloured background. Going further, one has the impression that this 'paint curtain' might lift, revealing to our gaze a scene that lies beyond it.

Lydia Mammes, however, does not lay plans in advance for this narrative or imaginative potential; instead, it simply emerges – sometimes almost inevitably – from the image-making process. One suspects that the artist is not excessively susceptible to the possibilities and charms of these painterly efflorescences. Speaking metaphorically, they open up only the smallest chink in the picture's surface to allow ingress to these illusions: These are faint echoes or gleams that cover the image with a breath of imagination, but they remain tied to the material of the image. It is significant that Mammes uses maximally unpretentious, sometimes almost pragmatic techniques of painting to create her pictures, which are plainly revealed as such: applying a 'coat' with the roller, whose tracks cover the picture's surface evenly or in offset form, or employing watery-looking brushstrokes that pass to and fro in a regular sequence or in soft curves. These painting actions never become pure expressionism – even if the paint flows down the canvas in long drips. Just as with the wiping of a board or the cleaning of a window, they

constantly emphasise the surface on which they take place. Initially, this surface itself is only an empty rectangle. A quadratic form, it is neither an upright rectangle, which could be understood as an analogue to the viewer, nor a longways rectangle, which puts one in mind of the horizon, and therefore associates too readily with landscape images.

Similarly, the rough material of the MDF panel, which Mammes consistently paints all but her largest-format pictures on, makes itself felt as an object-related element in the painting; sometimes, the untreated brown panel surface is actually left exposed. There is tremendous poetry in the way in which the painting responds to these preconditions whilst at the same time taking the gaze into a space of paint and light that is both differentiated and emotional.

In a large-format painting from 2011, an enormous brilliance of colour appears kindled. In the centre of the picture, a light, almost poisonous-looking yellow-green body of light curves forward (Fig.). It is as if this enormous presence were bursting through the cloudy smears of colour to either side, and through the glazes flowing down from above: this may relate to the title of the artwork: “Die Mitte eines Augenblicks” or (“The Centre of a Moment”). In a recent artwork from 2015, on the other hand, Mammes gives the picture a quality of inner light that is lower in volume but no less intensive (Fig.). It takes some considerable time before one notices, amid the petrol-coloured painted areas (which, in their turn, produce a profound light-related impression when viewed against the dark background) lighter, greenish glimmers. It is precisely because of the vagueness of these light phenomena that they retain their constant charm – they are a kind of apprehension, spreading through the nocturnal atmosphere of this painting. One constantly encounters aspects of an ongoing painterly transformation of this kind in the pictures of Lydia Mammes: a quiet but insistent painterly energy which, in the moment of perceiving it, can be best described as a *condition*, of greater or lesser extension.

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