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The Color of Silence

Fahlgrauer Himmel, von dem jede Farbe *bange verblich.* *Weit—ein einziger lohroter Strich* *wie eine brennende Geißelnarbe.*	Pale gray sky, from which every color anxiously faded. Far—a single tan-red stroke like a burning whip scar.
Irre Reflexe vergehn und erscheinen. *Und in der Luft* *liegts wie ersterbender Rosenduft* *und wie verhaltenes Weinen...*	Wild reflections vanish and appear. And in the air it lies like the scent of roses dying and like restrained weeping. . . .

Rainer Maria Rilke (aus: Traumgekrönt XIII)

Simply Beautiful

It is not only the first time one encounters paintings by Christian Faul that one cannot help but be greatly astonished. Firstly, because the painter's stupendous mastery of his craft is so immediately evident; and, secondly, but even more importantly, because of their overwhelming beauty.

For habitually observers of art, this undeniable discovery is associated with immediate surprise. For however much they might enjoy what they see, their conditioned perception ensures that they can only admit that to themselves, furtively and in secret; art today is not supposed to be so beautiful, flatter our vision in that way, and even—and this surely weighs most heavily against it—provide a naturalistic depiction of reality. And then these motifs: flowers, fish, clouds! They are immediately suspect of being kitsch, since anybody could appreciate such things—it doesn't take an art expert. Until recently beauty in art was only conceivable in combination with abstraction; a naturalistic depiction could have documentary value, could be used ironically or alienating in some other way; it could show the ugly, the grotesque, and the absurd, and in any case it was to be reserved for photography.

Christian Faul stands beyond this discussion. As a painter, photography is for him simply a tool

for appropriating nature, a kind of technological notepad and an aid to visual memory, a mere starting point. On closer observation it becomes clear that Faul is only marginally concerned with realistic depiction of natural phenomena.

Vita Contemplativa

This can be clearly seen in his paintings of koi, the Japanese ornamental carp that are bred in various colors and patterns solely for the sake of their beauty and even in nature are meant only to serve the viewer's pleasure. When one sees the paintings of colorful fish against a black background, it is impossible to deny their closeness to nature: we actually seem to be looking down into the dark water of a pond in which each koi follows its particular path. The motif is certainly recognizable. On closer inspection—and by that I literally mean observing from a point less far away—one can see that all the fish are blurred in a painterly way that clearly distinguishes them from a direct photographic reproduction; it neither suggests motion nor accurately portrays the results of looking through water that refracts the light to various degrees. Seen from close up, the tridimensionality of the pond dwellers seems to disappear almost entirely; only the patterns of the fish remain on the surface of the painting, as a flat figure whose lack of focus has something veil-like to it. That their fins completely take on the character of mere colored streaks also shows that the koi paintings are not simply photographs of fishponds but are instead deliberately placed color accents in an otherwise almost totally monochromatic, barely modulated blackish surface. It is altogether striking how much space Faul sets aside for his fish. Yet the large panels are still very realistic; their composition seems to be entirely due to chance: in some places the fish crowd each other not only on the sides but above and below; in other places the water remains an unanimated black. Frequently one sees koi that are cut off by the edge of the painting, appearing to peek curiously into the painting or about to leave its rectangle; only by chance does one occasionally appear in the painting's center. That suggests, first of all, movement and animation; astonishingly, however, it does not at all create a sense of uneasiness, as one might expect. On the contrary, the painter succeeds in communicating the impression of complete ease, an inward-looking, almost meditative way of seeing. It is as if someone in the garden were staring fixedly at one spot in the koi pond, and the fish were swimming one after another into his field of vision then diving down again, but as if the observer continued to gaze calmly straight ahead, not trying to follow or capture something with his eyes. Perhaps those who let the world pass by in this way will see more?

This immersing oneself in pure contemplation, this unintentional form of undirected attention corresponds to the elaborate process by which Christian Faul produces his paintings. Glaze painting—that is, the application of paint in several thin layers—is thoroughly old-fashioned. But that is not what removes the artist from the here and now as soon as he sits down before the easel; rather, it is the tremendous concentration that the work requires and that transports him into a trancelike state. This stepping out of the flux of time is shared with the viewer: like amber, the paintings conserve the beautiful at their center, accumulating layer after layer, and in that way preserve it for a brief eternity.

Reversals and Reflections

The series of koi paintings also demonstrates that the proximity of the motif to nature should not be confused with naturalism. All at once the black water in the background turns into its opposite and becomes completely white: a shimmering, light-filled, insubstantial white that with great difficulty obtains just enough cloudy structure to be seen as a medium that can contain space, usually with a slight blue cast that occasionally slips into the yellowish. Thus the koi even seem to swim in milk, or at least in a foggy sea of delicately nuanced white paint. This can no longer be justified by reference to nature but only by the artist's decision this time to place his colored accents against a complementary background.

Nor can one really be more certain that the blue clouds floating before a white sky are not the result of a negative reversal, or that this does not in fact conform to the natural image—though it is, admittedly, unusual to see blue clouds in a white sky. But this does not greatly affect the viewer who stands in front of Faul's painting: like blue smoke a fleeting breath of color passes over the white ground as if it were calligraphy brushed on in an instant by a practiced hand, a pure heavenly script that writes its own laws.

The motif of mirroring—in the sense of reversal, doubling, and symmetry—occurs repeatedly in Faul's oeuvre: for example, early on in his Kraków installation *Die andere Seite* (The other side) of 1995, with its mirror-reverse copy of Leonardo's painting *Lady with an Ermine* or later in his pairs of motor scooters or his double houses. In the paintings, however, the mirroring is always in the foreground as a reflection. As a motif it occurs almost invariably as a motif in the koi paintings. The reflections of light and mirror effects that occasionally occur in the black water surfaces are virtually eliminated in the almost immaterial white seas. The mirroring disappears from the motivic level, though it remains an essential element in the material of the paintings, not only in the fish paintings but in all the paintings on wood and aluminum laminate. The smooth, shiny surface gives the panel paintings something of the character of precious East Asian lacquerwork; at the same time, it makes it more difficult to recognize the motif, casts the viewer back on himself, and demands greater attention if he wants to approach the object depicted. In particular the mirroring favors extremely close viewing: a view of the details rather than the full surface of the formats, which often fill an entire wall. Faul quite deliberately brings into play the viewer's very concrete location in other ways as well: he combines a number of his large paintings with seating accommodations—wooden benches whose form is as simple as it is elegant—thus, on the one hand, inviting us to longer, sustained viewing and, on the other, precisely specifying the viewer's position as one of close proximity, such that the subject can easily fall out of our field of vision as our attention turns to the painting itself.

In the Space

That the painting calls for a vis-a-vis is just one aspect of this combination of painting and bench. The other is related to the question of the third dimension. Here too Christian Faul has found his entirely personal ways to free the classical panel painting from its spatial limitation and standardized flatness. As a matter of principle all of his paintings manage without frames; their limitation within the plane tends to be negated in that the artist smoothes the right angles of the

corners into curves or even in the ideal case paints them as tondi, which makes them seem boundless and infinite. That is not, however, the only reason why they seem less trapped within the surface of the rectangle of a painting: Faul always mounts the paintings on wood and aluminum on broad wooden sidepieces that lift the surface of the painting far from the wall. This urge to expand into the room corresponds to additions to the room—such as his benches, for example—that also anchor the painting as an object in the room or results in paintings that are quasi-sculptural floor pieces.

But Faul's interests in the third dimension is pathbreaking in yet another way: in the installations and in the form of buildinglike sculptures. These architectonic models represent in many respects the opposite pole to his painting. Whereas the paintings with the koi and flower motifs work with scale enlargements that direct our attention to unseen nuances and details, the windowless, towerlike stelae—which are modeled on Japanese parking garage towers—are not only substantially minimized in scale but also extremely reduced. Apart from patterns on the facade—here fluting and there a crude grid—their surfaces reveal no structure at all: they are all virtually colorless and from afar they look almost like repetitions of the pedestals on which they stand. Only the mirrored entryways and the large P's on the facade point to a functional context for these rectangular structures.

On the Site

Against the background of the paintings the miniaturized parking garages look strangely alien. But these high-rise garages also seem like alien sculptural objects within the cityscape of Kyoto, where Faul first encountered them. For the artist, it is as if they condense his experience of present-day Japan as a world of vehement contrasts. The formal contrast of the older, low urban construction to the vertically looming auto towers reflects the opposition of modernism and tradition. The garage structures are as narrow as they are tall—they are only as wide as two cars, and they make use of paternoster elevators—also symbolize the lack of space in large Japanese cities, the concentrated technology in the form of a storehouse of motorized energy, and even the Westernization of culture. Indeed, these high-rises are in fact labeled with a P for parking, that is, with Latin letters rather than Japanese characters.

Faul's installation for Saint Sebald Church in Nuremberg is site specific in a more abstract sense, since here he does not adopt any alien motifs but instead picks up on a theme that returns like a leitmotiv: paintings of the sky and clouds. With good reason, of course, it could be asserted that they have their true place here, since where else do heavenly paintings belong, if not in a church? One could argue to the contrary that the Saint Sebald Church is primarily a tourist attraction, and thus more a site of art historical pilgrimage than a house of God, and thus it is simply a particularly atmospheric form of museum in which Christian Faul was temporarily exhibiting twenty-four of his paintings. But the form in which they were presented reveals that they are firmly connected to this site. As the title betrays, they are suspended "between heaven and earth," and thus by no means at the optimal viewing height of a museum but rather at a sometimes substantial distance over the viewers' heads, on the Gothic compound piers. The rectangular paintings in particular give the impression that they are replacing other, older paintings and epitaphs or even profane text panels or signs indicating the number of the hymn to be sung; in fact, Faul is using existing hooks that once bore memorial panels. The round

paintings assert the uniqueness of their design all the more clearly. All of them are distributed around the chancel and in the crossing, at irregular distances and heights, so that they look as if they were punched out of the sky. In the large space the delicate paintings are almost lost, and they give the impression one could catch lightning-quick glances at little excerpts of a heavenly continuum, at a sky that comes markedly closer to the earth than usual.

Abundance of Light

As in all painting that can be taken seriously, light plays a central role in Christian Faul's works. For example, the flower paintings with their dark backgrounds present harsh contrasts between the luminously bright blooms and sometimes bright green leaves in the foreground and that backgrounds that recede into marshy dark browns. Once again it becomes evident that the experience of nature in Faul's paintings is highly mediated. The photographic reproduction can be clearly seen as a mediator that determines his perception, whether or not the painting was made from a photograph that looked exactly like it. The bright light looks artificial; it might even come from a flash or be due to the inadequacy of photographic reproduction. In any case, the overexposure makes the colors pale and the contours blur, something that rarely if ever happens to the human eye but constantly happens to the technical eye of a camera. The out-of-focus areas in the background are produced in such extreme form that it is clear they have a technical cause, occasionally developing into completely diffuse patches of colored light, or even perhaps depicting directly the optical reflections of the light refracted by the lens of the camera.

A quite different and astonishing character is obtained by the light in Faul's paintings with oil on Plexiglas. The plastic sheets with rounded edges are slightly matte, so that they produce not transparent but merely translucent grounds for the paintings. They are mounted at a slight distance from the wall, which makes them seem to float, almost as if immaterial, and at the same time they allow light through from two directions—that which comes from in front and that which reflects from behind. This richness of light changes the character of the colors fundamentally and lends the paintings truly unique spatial effects. Namely, the layers of paint that are applied in thin glazes become transparent and give the impression of being inside or even behind the plate, whereas the sections where the paint is applied opaquely seem, despite all the brightness, to lie clearly in front of it. The result is that the paintings look as if they were several layers glued together or as if painted from both sides—neither is the case, however: the paints are all applied layer by layer to the front.

Sometimes the two planes of the painting almost seem to belong to different realities. The delicate cherry blossoms are close enough to touch, having an almost supernatural presence, whereas the cloud-striped background seems to be pushed back into infinite distances. Even the stems that shoot up from the yellowish green leafy chalices of the plantain lilies—those pale, bluish violet flowers with their still closed buds—cast no shadows, as one might initially think they would, but loom up into the heights before a delicate, also green and yellow web that loses itself in the light like a visual echo.

In the Plexiglas works Faul also manages to develop further two essential aspects of his oeuvre: the empty plane as an integral element of the painting and a penchant for abstraction. A perfect

example of the latter is the highly stylized painting of a chrysanthemum, since not only is there a flatter brush style evident here but also an almost expressive gestural verve that flings the yellow paint in broad paths and curves over a diffuse background, so that in the resulting explosion of color the motivic origin of a yellow blossom on a dark green mesh of leaves against a cloudy blue sky is surmised more than it is seen.

But even in the more puristic sky paintings the representational associations of cloud formations gradually disappear; it becomes clearly evident, as we have already seen in many earlier works, that they are not paintings from nature but motifs that are completely free inventions. The layered, frayed, dissolving clouds become paintings of stripes having nothing to do with objects, first blue, then white, then gray—floating, pulsating, shadowless colored spaces. As mirror-radiant polyptychs or as single opalescently shimmering Plexiglas panels they approach an almost enraptured state of painting: pure emptiness.