

SABINE MULLER

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MARCIA HAFIF

FRENCH PAINTINGS - WATERCOLORS

Marcia Hafif's painting gets by with a minimum of effort. The paint is built up on the canvas or forms itself on the paper brushstroke upon brushstroke, until the entire surface is covered. The high degree of uniformity demands a concentrated and continuous working method allowing no lengthy interruptions. The works require a certain, perhaps what could be called contemplative, state of mind. This is true where the smaller formats of the watercolors are concerned or the centered squares of the French Paintings in which the painted surface spreads out from the middle extending to the edges so that, again and again, one has to start at other positions. Painting here is understood as a ritual act in which the paint assumes form through personal gesture.

This does not involve a mechanical application (of paint). It is rather more like a kind of writing, a color text whose scope is determined by the format. Marcia Hafif herself uses the metaphor of a diary in her work. This is a diary composed of pictures to express just how much the paintings are linked to the personal. Working through the surface as a day's work - on another day, this process can be repeated. In the case of the French Paintings, three layers of paint were applied to each canvas. These layers diverge from each other according to the varying proportions of red, blue or yellow contained in each of them. A substantial thickness results from the, in and of themselves, thin-skinned membranes of paint. These remind one not so much of skin, but rather more of flesh or tissue.

In the case of the watercolors, this remains just one layer in which, avoiding any strong effects, one hue in watercolor is spread over the paper. The paper is painted at a slight angle so that no excessive pooling of paint occurs nor is the paint allowed to flow too much. What we see is the result of a carefully controlled process, a kind of interaction between the paint and a guiding hand. The brushstrokes leave more heavily or less pronounced traces of paint behind them according to the properties of the pigment. On comparison of the individual sheets, attention is directed to the colors in their consistency and materiality. A basic position is called up in the viewer; a position Hafif had called for in a short statement already in 1977: "...to perceive what really exists: the pigment in its particular medium in a state of fulfillment. Paintings must be looked at, not looked into." (1)

The subjective aspects of this painting are revealed precisely because the artist is able to hold herself back, to move within a narrow scope of action in which small decisions come to fruition. The characteristic painting method, which is closely tied to the paint itself, unites seemingly contrary elements: analysis and the lack of intention, an activity derives directly from feeling. This is why Marcia Hafif, in talking about her work, can claim: "The act of applying the paint (...) (Becomes) as much a part of the content of the

work as the paint itself.” (2) The act becomes content because it comes into being in the first place as the determining variable and because it becomes apparent how the act of applying the paint keeps the paint in a state of suspense.

In 1972, Marcia Hafif began to concentrate entirely on the relationship between painting materials and the act of painting. She thereby became involved with the long-term project in which the tradition of Western painting is regarded as the basis from which a renewal in painting could be realized. She has always been concerned with using a particular material in a traditional way i.e. oil paint on canvas or watercolor on paper. Following her stringent logic, she started with the “simplest”: pencil and paper. She writes: “I took pencil and paper and started to systematically fill the sheet with short vertical marks. Suddenly there was no need for a mediator between me and my materials.” (3) Studies in acrylics followed, a range of 108 barely discernible shades of gray in oil, etc. Up till now, 16 groups of work have been created, which have in part, developed parallelly or, in part, as modifications of earlier series.

Writing forms a solid component of Marcia Hafif’s work. She is concerned with comprehensibility for herself and for the viewer. In the catalogue for her exhibition in Wuppertal in 1994 (4), she gave a firm break down of the individual groups of work, the questions she was dealing with and a definition of their exact parameters. Despite the rationality with which she renders account of her life’s work, the reader and viewer is made accomplice in a fascinating expedition into the subdivisions of perception.

Over time, a new language with its own grammatical rules developed out of the distilled ABCs of painting. In the oil paintings Hafif began in 1973, she used a single canvas for each pigment, varying however, the format according to the symbolic expression of the color. For green and blue hues, with their associations towards landscapes, she employed horizontal formats which traditionally connote landscapes or seascapes. For warm or red hues, she used vertical formats alluding to portraiture. In 1976, spacial relationships began to play an increasingly important role in her work. “Paintings in neutral mixed colors,” in different formats and proportions, “in order to heighten the complexity of the installation.” (5)

Two years later, in the “Paintings with broken colors” very large formats were introduced. These were no longer painted from upper left to lower right, as had been the case in the past, but rather, from the center of the canvas outwards. Hafif commented: “The reach of my arm determined the angle of slope the brushstroke took and when I had completed the painting a picture had come forth in the center and upper half - the horizontal and vertical extension of the human figure in a landscape. I experienced here a transformation from the objectivity of my previous work towards a certain subjectivity which allowed me to paint myself into the painting.” (6)

The French Paintings in this exhibition were executed in 1992, 20 years after the beginning of Hafif’s inventory of painting. It seems logically consistent that all of her previous investigations should be echoed here. Despite this, the French Paintings

remain one group among others which can be continued according to necessity. The color scheme of the French Paintings is related to the previous series: the Roman Paintings. These, in turn, were concerned with the way skin and flesh tones were treated in traditional painting.

These associations - as well as the titling after a place which molded these groups - refer more to formal connections than to an explicit fixing of content. Nevertheless, the French Paintings seem to be markedly corporeal-emotional in comparison to the artist's other groups of work. The large areas of pink color provoke ambivalent evocations of feeling. This applies to the color scheme as well, in which cool and warm hues are equally united with each other, producing an impression which alternates between warm and cool. The object-like character of the paintings is created by the use of relatively thick stretcher bars. The color surface develops the tendency to jut out into the room like a figment standing free from the wall.

The French Paintings are painting-objects. They claim a physical presence as objects for themselves and differ from a traditional painting - and do so in a radical way - as can only be effected through the rejection of representational connotations. The search for a renewal of painting extends from the fact that painting has lost its icon-like aura. It is a question of regaining absolute values, the artwork itself is seen as an absolute value - as an artifact created by man. And it cannot be ruled out that the metaphysical may creep in via the painting's pure physical state.

In 1984 Marcia Hafif exhibited in Gunter Umberg's "Raum fur Malerei" (Room for Paintings). To describe her work only as an important contribution to "Radical Painting" would not be quite accurate; no one has undertaken the program of the "Investigation of the original essence of painting" (7) so unconditionally as she. With every painting she poses the question anew: What is painting, what can it be for us today?

Translation: Michael A. Tighe

(1) Bilder ohne Bilder (Pictures without pictures), Rheinisches Landesmuseum, Bonn, 1977/78 pg. 82

(2) Marcia Hafif, From the Inventory, Stiftung fur konstruktiv und konkrete Kunst, (Foundation for Constructive and Concrete Art) Zurich, 1995, pg 19

(3) Text on the exhibition "Apollo Huis: Eindhoven, 1995

(4) Marcia Hafif, From the Inventory, Kunst und Museumsverein, Wuppertal, Kunsthalle Barmen in Haus der Jugend, Wuppertal-Barmen, 1994

(5) loc cit., pg 41

(6) loc cit., pg 43

(7) Joseph Marioni and Gunter Umberg, "Outside the Cartouche," (1986), quote from Gunter Umberg, Raum fur Malerei, Reihe Cantz (Edition Cantz) Stuttgart 1994, pg 12