

PAINTING IN THE USUAL WAY

In summer 1989 and 1990 Marcia Hafif used the gallery space as her studio. So the painting for *INSTALLATION DER FARBE* (with Dieter Villinger and Olivier Mosset, October 1989, and for *RED PAINTINGS*, November 1990, have their origins in the surrounding where they were first exhibited. Accepting the conditions as they are, they serve as a basis of her concept of painting. Even all the materials were bought in the local shops. Thereby installations have been created which define the term anew.

HW: In Neuss in 1989 you painted a series of enamel on plywood paintings, but you also made a few oil on canvas paintings that were very different. How is this possible?

MH: This was because of the way in which my work proceeds, which is from one series to the next, and when I came to Neuss last year I was working on both groups as I still am now.

HW: You began with monochrome painting about twenty years ago and it seems that during this time you have worked on a vocabulary of painting which includes many basic elements of painting and almost all painting techniques from watercolor on paper to wall painting. The way your work developed in the 70s seems to be very close to the experimental research of a scientist.

MH: In the 60s working in Rome my painting was abstract, and my interest in abstract painting prompted me to move to New York in 1971 to continue working with abstraction in what I thought would be an active context. Once I was actually in NY I soon realized that the painting that had interested me was now exhausted, that perhaps modern abstract painting might be exhausted as well. As I began to paint in New York I felt I could not simply continue as usual, I could not even put two colors together on one canvas without repeating something I already knew. I decided not to use more than one color on a painting, and this was what led to my involvement with monochrome.

At that time a friend had lent me a book, *The Materials of the Artist*, by Max Doerner*. I had never studied the materials of painting, and it was in reading that book that I was inspired to use the information in it as the subject of my painting. I would follow these directions while making paintings empty of the content to which the book implicitly referred.

It was then that I saw the path I would follow even now, not in detail, as that would have to be worked out in practice, but I would explore the materials and methods of painting and drawing and make those my subject. There was an irony in following the directions exactly but for an entirely different purpose.

HW: Then the enamel paintings and the oil paintings come from two different series out of the many with which you have worked. Could you describe the differences more fully.

MH: In each group of work I look for a consistency between the materials and the approach to painting. Enamel is used on wood because it is a brittle paint and needs a hard support. I paint the painting simply as one would paint an object. I do not expect the surface to reach perfection in the sense that it would seem immaterial, I just paint it smoothly and evenly letting what incidents occur create the image. I do not try to hide the fact that I am using household enamel on ordinary plywood. It is usually painted flatly and neatly and it dries very quickly so I use a large brush and apply it rapidly in the same way one would paint a door or a table.

Using oil on canvas the process is different. The oil dries slowly so I can choose to work all over the canvas at once if I do not want to work systematically from top to bottom. With the French and Roman Paintings I mix different colors together which I never do with enamel, and I use a smaller brush.

HW: The consistency between the materials and the approach to the painting is a major aspect in your work. Also it is for the analytic context from where you started. But I have to say these recent oil paintings are much closer to traditional painting than the enamel on wood. It is not only the fact that you use ordinary household enamel and apply it in the usual way. The enamel on wood paintings, both with the boxed and the flat plywood support, become a sort of self-contained flat object. The oil on canvas paintings refer to the history of painting.

MH: The subject of the Roman Paintings was the traditional color in which skin tones are painted - with layers of paint I wanted to create a surface something like a skin. I have always been interested in that literal skin of paint, which is the reason I leave the painting, unframed allowing the edge of it to be visible.

The French Paintings come from the Roman ones but were influenced by my stay in Lyon in France. The French Paintings are always square, and I use a more pale and more violet color in response to the colors of Lyon. When I recently made a painting on wood - the first of the enamels was actually a French Painting - I wanted to make a break from my previous way of working. Going to the lumberyard to look for something to paint on, I found a square of plywood, took it home and painted it using enamel I made from the directions in the book. I was pink and "French," but it started this later series in which I search in hardware stores for materials finding readymade enamel colors and painting them on squares of wood.

Working in Munich in 1989 I looked for local colors, and then coming to Neuss found different ones available, and these were all different from those in New York. It seemed that people in each location had their own preferences. This year in Neuss I was influenced by my perception that there are very many red cars in Germany, and I began to look for the different red enamels in the stores (which is why this group is titled Red Colors).

It is true that the hard wooden support and the very simple materials create a more self-contained object. In the past I have most often used precious materials - stretched cotton canvas, linen, oil paint, watercolors, handmade paper, etc. to refer to the traditional practices of painting. When I used wood previously it was to demonstrate egg tempera painting, which was current in the early Renaissance. Enamel and plywood are materials of today with a more contemporary look.

HW: Yes, the parameters of the work I have set out for myself are large, essentially the recapitulation of Western painting, and could include geometric or figurative references to painting and even the materials of sculpture and on to other forms. But the work moves slowly from series to series and I may never go that far. Still the enamel on wood was a big jump, and it is hard to predict what the next will be.

HW: The fact that you use the accidents of a place where you go to work, and the fact that you do not know exactly what you will find, rather reminds me of Fluxus.

MH: It is true that I enjoy putting myself in the position of not knowing in advance precisely what I will do and letting myself be inspired by what I find. I think of myself recently as an itinerant painter traveling to make work to order. I do not even take my brushes, but just myself to locations where I am able to stay for a while and to find the materials and influences - the inspiration - for working. What I want to do I find in that place.

HW: What are some of the other series that have formed your work since 1972?

MH: This investigation started with the most simple kind of art materials: pencil and paper. I began covering whole sheets of paper with vertical lines making many drawings in this manner between 1972 and 1976 and observing the spontaneous patterns that developed as I worked. When these were under way I thought about using paint on canvas, and having acrylic paint in my studio I began the first painting series, which repeated an artist's palette separating the colors onto 17 canvases. I chose ordinary cotton canvas of a middle size (4' by 4' - 121 x 121 cm.), large enough to be able to see the color in an objective way. That series completed itself with 17 of the most common colors.

Next I chose to work with the gray scale. I set up a project (An Extended Gray Scale) that would take a long time to make so that I could be involved with it continuously, and one that would lead me into considerations I could not predict. Instead of the usual ten gradations from black to white, I made as many as I could distinguish applying different mixtures of gray oil paint on stretched canvas 22" (56 cm.) square. When I had made quite a lot of them it became necessary to set up various systems for evaluating the differences, the process taking about ten months to do and closing itself out when there were 108 pieces, and when I could not distinguish another shade.

The next step was to understand how oil paint is made. I bought pigments, linseed oil and tools for grinding pigments into oil. Each color I could find was ground separately into oil and painted on a separate canvas (22 x 22" or 22 x 28"). These were the Oil Studies; there were about fifty-six of them. This work was very instructive to me as I saw how the pigments worked. Commercial paint in tubes is adjusted with additives to make it behave properly, but I let each pigment go its own way. Some were flat, others grainy, some dried fast, others very slowly and the surfaces varied with these differences.

I used the same method to make the Mass Tone Paintings, larger versions of the Oil Studies that introduced the element of time as it took all day to grind the pigment in oil and to paint them, and the drying speed of the pigment created surface effects on the painting.

With the installation of the Mass Tone Paintings another element became foremost in my work, that of the relation between the painting and the wall. Any possible arrangement of the paintings seemed to create a composition with the wall while I had wanted to eliminate that. Even one painting alone appropriated the wall to itself. In my next exhibition in New York I painted one entire wall in order to avoid those effects. The same exhibition focused on other relations to the wall and on varied paint materials on their appropriate supports. The big wall painting was casein painted directly on the wall; there were also oil on canvas, oil glaze and encaustic on wood whose sizes were determined by the wall as well as a set of smaller egg tempera on wood.

With the Neutral Mix Paintings in 1976-77 I chose stretchers of various and more traditional proportions and sizes, working with the problem I felt museums must face in hanging disparate paintings together, so that these paintings were intended to be hung closely - above and below each other "Academy Style." The colors were neutral in that I mixed opposite colors together in an effort to cancel their hues, but arriving instead at various soft grays.

Among other groups that followed were the Broken Color Paintings, the Black Paintings, the New Mass Tone and the Transparent Paintings before I began the Roman Paintings in 1986.

HW: To go back to your disillusionment with the situation in New York in 1972 it seems that coming to New York meant in a certain sense losing your innocence as a painter. On the other hand it seems that you had chosen a kind of splendid isolation because your work in New York at that time was this kind of painting experiment?

MH: I was probably naïve about that. I thought I had found a completely new reason to paint. I knew about monochrome painting. In 1961 on one of my first trips to New York I had been impressed by a small painting of Ralph Humphrey's, and I knew about the work of Ad Reinhardt, Yves Klein, Malevich, Rodchenko and also Brice Marden, Robert Mangold and Robert Ryman. I was interested in their work, but I felt I was doing something very different. I was not making transcendental paintings but was letting the

image grow out of very straightforward experimentation, probably closer to Ryman than to the others. But in New York in the early seventies I did not know many of the other later monochrome painters.

HW: The mainstream of Pop Art, was it not?

MH: Pop Art continued into the seventies along with the other movements of the sixties: Minimalism, Environment, Conceptual and Body Art . . . many movements. In the early seventies some of us were trying to find a way out of those established systems. Though my work may be thought of as Minimal, my effort was to be free of that. My work not only contained a reference to past painting, it also avoided the industrial finishes and the mathematical sets and permutations of Minimalism.

Pop Art never interested me very much although I appreciated Andy Warhol's work with film. Process Art was more influential as I incorporated that method into my "process" paintings setting up an action with the result of that being the product. I made a ritual out of the process of grinding paint and applying it over the eight to nine hours required to paint a large painting. I could not let myself be interrupted without letting other information into the paintings such as extraneous drying marks.

HW: Did that mean that painting could be a meditative act for you? Is it a spiritual process too?

MH: I have long been interested in meditation, and at that time I had just taught myself to meditate. The repetitive method I developed for making drawings - vertical pencil marks starting in the upper left corner of the surface and continuing in a systematic manner toward the bottom finishing at the lower right - meant that the act of drawings became a meditation.

HW: What does the meditative quality of the painting mean for the viewer? The viewer has to spend time in front of a monochrome painting, but there is not much inviting him to stay.

MH: What I was talking about was my experience as the artist; the viewer would have a different one, more of a contemplative experience in which the painting becomes a sort of icon. Or alternatively to understand the work in a more intellectual way approaching it through its references.

HW: This is important because there is a difference between seeing your work and being in front of an Yves Klein or Mark Rothko painting since your work does not emphasize a transcendental notion of color as theirs often does.

MH: No it does not; I wanted to avoid that especially in the beginning. The early work was analytic. There were periods in the late seventies and early eighties with the Broken Color and Black paintings when I thought I was being more subjective, that I

was painting myself into painting, but more recently, particularly with the enamel paintings, the process is quite objective.

HW: When you came to New York and to the point that you could not go on with painting you asked yourself, "Why paint," then you shifted your position and continued though with a different attitude toward painting. When you were here in 1989 you wrote a statement on painting in which once again you asked, "Why paint." Do you think that at this time it is still important to ask this question?

MH: In the early seventies I thought painting was finished, and that I was writing the footnotes to it, not that I was the only one, but that artists collectively were doing that, just marking time and completing the project of painting as we had known it. Now I am more inclined to ask why I paint since I have turned away somewhat from a program of analysis. Now I feel a more personal relationship to my work in that it is to a greater degree self-generated and less directed toward criticism of art. Rather than think about the larger history of painting, I work in it and expand the fifteen or more series I have developed. I do not think so much about "Why paint" since within this context there is endless work to do.

*Max Doerner, *The Materials of the Artist*, Munich 1921

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