

## Purified paintings

Of the scraped-off flesh of paint and the exposed bones of the support

On the press tour organized by “based in Berlin”, which consecutively went to the five participating venues by shuttle, the duration of the stop at the Neuer Berliner Kunstverein was generous enough to have a look around the vicinity. Directly across from the institution, on the other side of Chausseestrasse, stands the Wilde Gallery, which I noticed in passing several times before. On this day, through the large shop windows, my gaze fell on huge, gloomy pictures, which called to visitors by virtue of their long-distance effect. Following this magical pull, you quickly find yourself in the gallery space and stand as if paralyzed in front of the largest of the exhibited works.

It is a mistreated and abused picture, unfinished and in the process of becoming. One feels the pain and wistfulness that emanate from this work, and is captivated by this powerful impression. *Stupid # 1* is part of the solo exhibition by the Canadian John Brown, whose painting technique holds the key to this arresting effect.

Approaching, one can see that parts of the work are done in rich impasto, others are characterized by a sparse, large-scale application of paint, while still others are the result of extensive grattage. The body of the depicted figure is in places a wild heap of pastose blobs of paint that do not follow any figurative contours: they are more impressed into than painted onto the surface, not gesticulated, but flat and lifeless, then scratched away again in the same way, painted over and mixed up. In turn, where the white scratch marks are more extensive, the painting surface appears as smooth as a mirror. One therefore suspects a plastic or composite material as the medium, but is surprised to find that it is simply wood.

One could almost say that John Brown is mistreating his works. Their history often goes back a long time, often he is inspired by a photograph, then applies layer upon layer of color and scratches it off again. One painting whitewashes the other, is removed in parts and makes room for the next. This way the game goes on and on, until a result is finally achieved that is an expression of its becoming. Nevertheless, the impression prevails that something is missing, that the removed paint weighs more heavily than that which remains.

John Brown's works - particularly *Portrait of M.A.* - are in the process of disintegrating. The traces of previous states dominate those that are still present. Losses become visible. Grief and pain set in. Sometimes nostalgia and melancholy join in too, namely when, as in *Stupid # 1*, the dissolving image develops an aesthetic of extinction. Brown sums it up best himself:

“My painting is subtractive, scraping and scratching away the flesh of paint, down to the wooden bones of the support.”

Brown's grattage no longer has anything in common with Max Ernst's restrained markings or Wols' graceful sweeps. Its application is far more ruthless. The technique is radical. It is not its intention to suggest or briefly mention any deeper layers of color. John Brown's goal is the extinction of any obstruction that conceals the painting surface.

“The light in my paintings comes from the back, instead of coming from the outside. My removal of paint is undertaken to allow more light to enter from the rear. [...] I do so because I want to see the light, because I want to see what results from the scraping and subtraction.”

This dualism between light and dark inevitably introduces a moral component. The act of scraping is atonement, and light is purification. If you continue to follow this thread, you will arrive at the catharsis of the painting, but you will also see that that of the audience is missing. For Brown's works are not pursuing an effect of shock or compassion, nor grief or fear. Contrary to the ancient and classical idea of catharsis, his works do not aim to educate the viewer through emotional attachment.

The emancipation of the viewer, as Rancière said so beautifully, has already been achieved with Brown. His paintings neither want to communicate nor be understood, they stand on their own irrespective of the viewer and thereby construct a distance that in turn develops an aesthetic of the inaccessible and untouchable. John Brown's works do indeed appear distant and isolated, but only become interesting because of this and – once the curious beholder has been seized by them – reflect a hidden, highly emotional drama that is neither intrusive nor ingratiating.

The exhibition in the Wilde Gallery (Chausseestraße 7, 10115 Berlin) unfortunately ends on June 18th. Anyone who can find time during the opening hours, Wednesdays to Saturdays, from 12 to 6 pm, shouldn't miss this exhibition - and should definitely get close to the paintings; they are worth it.