

Hidden Illusion

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Broad flows of orange paint in vertical and horizontal bands extend over the entire wall, here and there reaching up to the ceiling. At first the acrylic paint seems to be peeling off in places, but in fact that's the vinyl banners the paint has been applied to. The work on display in 2012 at Berlin's Kunstraum Kreuzberg appeared in similar form in 2010, adding luminous accents to the standing walls of a ruined barn in the Uckermark, albeit in blue-green.

The way Franziska Hünig operates is reasonably easy to describe, including the fact that she works with very wide brushes attached to long handles. What's harder is putting her art into a category. She applies paint to a ground, an act that can be unambiguously classified as "painting". But the painting surface itself often takes on a sculptural quality – is given more prominence, almost, than the paint. When the banners are draped over construction fencing or lie creased and crumpled on the floor, as they did in 2013 in the Künstlerhaus Balmoral exhibition space in Bad Ems, one would be more likely to use the term "installation". Or is it actually "spatialized" painting?

When we turn our gaze back to what has been painted, here too, nothing is really unambiguous. The layers of paint tend to have a transparent look, reminiscent of the way watercolors soak into paper. But while the paint has been thinned to varying degrees, the appearance of absorption is produced by its opposite, as the banners do not uniformly take up the paint. And is this "pure" painting, that only signifies "itself," or can the brushstrokes in fact be read as "representations"? The bands of paint, which generally run straight, recall the lines one makes with highlighters and can be seen as greatly enlarged replications of them, much like Roy Lichtenstein's cartoon style renderings of gigantic "brushstrokes." Those are clearly "representations" of brushstrokes, or graphic symbols for them. In Franziska Hünig's work, on the other hand, the brushstroke really "is" one, as what we see are the direct traces of the act of painting. But when we recall the marks made by a highlighter, it becomes an indexical reference to those as well.

It gets even more complicated when the painting is combined with a ground that is printed. In 2013, in both Bad Ems and an installation in the excavated ruins of a Roman bath complex in Trier, the banners Franziska Hünig used, painted with broad expanses of yellow, had previously been used for advertising. The black-and-white printing shows through in places and remains completely visible on the backs of the banners, which can be seen as another form of indexical reference. And not only are the banners doubly covered, their varying and not always consistent placement in the space makes it impossible to definitively sort the backs from the fronts.

When a picture hangs on the wall, the front faces the viewer and the back is unseen, unless the picture is turned around. The illusionistically painted reverse side of a painting was a favorite motif in classical trompe l'oeil painting, and Lichtenstein took up the theme as well in 1968 with a series of stretcher-frame backs painted in cartoon style, thereby subverting the originally intended optical illusion.

In Franziska Hünig's work this play of front and back is transposed by the picture itself, so to speak, to the associative, indeed architectural context of the piece. The front is the display side, the facade, the back something like an untidy backyard that is entered only by residents and shown to no one else. When, in the history of art, paintings depict architecture, they show the facades most of the time, the backyards only occasionally. Gerard ter Borch did give us a glimpse into the backyard of a Dutch stonemason's family in the mid-seventeenth century. And it was also a stonemason's yard that Canaletto used to peer behind the facades of the palaces along the Grand Canal, which we see in his related Venetian vedutas.

When Franziska Hünig throws or drapes her painted banners over barrier fences, she is also creating a situation that resembles a backyard or construction site. The suggestion is that we are looking at a provisional positioning which may be the result of purely practical causes, though of course we know and can also visually grasp how deliberately and thoroughly composed all of the artist's arrangements are. (These can also be linked to the trompe l'oeil tradition, in which seemingly arbitrary arrangements, such as letters and memos hanging on pinboards, were quite popular.) The painted blue-green banner that spills, crumpled, down a narrow passage between two wall sections in Trier could theoretically be a covering for some construction or repair project, but it also suggests a stream of water flowing through. And even for viewers who don't make that association, it creates a distinct and memorable image at any rate.

Whereas in illusionistic painting the "look" of the picture obscures what exists in material reality, in a sense the opposite is true in Franziska Hünig's work. At first it seems that we merely "see what we see", and yet hidden behind that is a multilayered play of levels and relationships in which illusion, too, plays a decisive role.

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