

Looking and Seeing Contemplation of Paintings by Rémy Trevisan

“The eyes can be windows that peer into boredom or peek into infinity.”
Carlos Castaneda

Bernstein monastery church combines baroque pomp and sparse interior like a dense fog in which the spirit floats. Crowned with a shallow dome, when empty it is a spartan prayer hall and neutral white cube gallery in one. A nowhere place, full of potential for ideas, feelings and visions - a utopia removed from everyday life. It is art that tears holes in the mist, drawing our gaze further, carrying our thoughts upward, letting figures unexpectedly enter the room or reflecting us like dull mirrors. The presence of works of art transforms the utopian potential of the church space into heterotopy. Michel Foucault used this concept to describe places where different layers of space, time and meaning overlap and intermingle, producing a wide variety of stimuli and significance that reach far beyond the clear functionality of ordinary everyday places. Heterotopy is an aesthetic experience like looking into a prism, where the field of vision is mysteriously refracted and broken up into an unimaginable number of little worlds.

This opening of the church interior to a diversity of insights into and perspectives of the world is intensified by Rémy Trevisan's space installation, because each of his works presents an aesthetic gateway to a whole universe. The pictures shifting between hints of microcosm and macrocosm have an impressive effect and yet are strange at first glance, as they are completely different from the pictorial concepts and representations of space we are used to. Beyond illusionism as we know it since the painting of the Renaissance, but equally beyond all variants of 20th century abstract art, Rémy Trevisan's work opens onto immaterial spaces with oddly diffuse structures, some tissue-like, some cell-like, which capture the eye but at the same time draw it into unknown expanses. Due to the complexity of their overlapping visual structures, most of the paintings give the viewer nothing to fix on. Unlike conventional images, they don't lead our gaze into a continuous depth of space, whether filled with real or abstract forms. Instead, one is exposed to a subtle play of optical impressions where the relationships between objects and space, between foreground and background, tangibility and distance, materiality and immateriality, are switched and turn into the opposite at every point in the picture. One perceives a fragmentary form approaching like a cloud about to obscure one's vision, then at the very moment when the eye catches it, it transforms itself into a boundless space as if the shape were the eye of a needle to infinity. These abrupt switches of vision, caused by the juxtaposition of positive and negative forms or by mirrored, sometimes inverted patterns of composition in varying colours, produce a constant dynamic of space and eye movement which almost physically grips the viewer.

Unlike paintings by Caspar David Friedrich or Wassily Kandinsky, Trevisan's pictures are not a metaphor for the change from outward looking to inward seeing, nor do they symbolize eternity. More like the 'colour field' painting of Barnett Newman

and Mark Rothko, in the process of contemplation they enable us to do both at the same time, look and see, sometimes in a flash, sometimes with a slow eye movement. As if the veil of the world and the associated patterns of interpretation were tearing, these pictures upset our conventional perception of images and reality. The minute we perceive them, they manage to convey both external and mental, that is, visible and invisible images. Although we can't actually see any specific shapes, some of Rémy Trevisan's paintings remind us of the impenetrable tangle of thickets. At times we imagine remnants of Palaeolithic cave paintings, then just cursory lines on the sea bed, or scratch marks on weathered rock. The next minute we think we're seeing leaves slowly waving against the night sky under the cold light of the moon; somewhere else we feel the vastness of space. But all of these are merely fleeting visual fragments which, evoked by the complex structure of the paintings, float past the inner eye of the viewer in an endless chain of association. They seem to flow into each other as effortlessly as blurred dream images which as we see them are already passing into oblivion.

Rémy Trevisan's paintings however do not just trap the viewer in the dim mist of visual worlds lurking in the individual subconscious. Rather, the groups of paintings and picture installations in the monastery church of Bernstein create a broader context of meaning that reaches down to the depths of human culture and from there leads out into the realm of archetype and symbolic primeval forms. The cross, for instance, is not to be understood in the sense of an altar as relating to the Christian concept of redemption; here the ancient symbol found as far back as in Stone Age societies is placed in a prominent position with larger and cross-cultural significance. Long before it was adopted and interpreted by Christianity, the cross represented the union of the world in crossing the cosmic vertical line with the earthly horizontal line, thereby uniting the four cardinal points and the four mythological kingdoms associated with them. Whether in old Indian religion, Siberian shamanism, Celtic cult or later in Christianity, the cross is the elemental symbol of the universe into which human beings are born, and both their anthropological and personal destiny is to become aware of its totality and unity. In this sense, the various pictures forming Rémy Trevisan's cross with the title "Es gibt viel mehr Dinge zwischen Himmel und Erde" (There are more things in heaven and earth) should be seen in context, as microcosms in a macrocosm, parallel worlds in the space of the whole, individuals enfolded in oneness.

In the space installation of the monastery church the cross is flanked by two paintings which resemble processional banners with their red and white symmetry. Their identical title "Ich bin" (I am) moves the viewer to look at them from different angles. As if standing in front of a mirror, we are requested to recognize ourselves in the picture, to put ourselves right into the picture, as it were. The statement "I am", without any punctuation mark to complete it, suggests an ultimate commitment to life, to the moment and one's personal history. But the ego the two pictures are addressing is also offered a cosmic perspective. The red strip in the middle of both, like the detail of a mighty stream of lava, is - comparable to Constantin Brancusi's "Endless Column" or Barnett Newman's "Zips" - a symbol of the *axis mundi*, the mystical world axis which passes through the spine of each of us and connects us with the entirety of all being. Where the ego within is transcended, the space opens to eternity.

A similar merging of the individual and the spiritual is suggested by a further group of works, where each of the three paintings is named after a famous picture by Paul Gauguin: "Woher kommen wir? Wer sind wir? Wohin gehen wir?" (Where do we come from? What are we? Where are we going?). The great French painter chose a symbolic narrative form to depict the fundamental issues of life, progressing from the

biographical to the transcendental. Rémy Trevisan's paintings, by contrast, confront us with a pure energy of colour and form that sucks us into the picture, whirls us around in it and then releases us. At Bernstein these pictures are hung relatively low for the dimensions of a church so that - as the artist says - they can be encountered at eye level. This enables us to contemplate them more directly as analogies for the great mystery of the cycle of birth, life and death. Contrary to most art, outwardly the images do not catch our gaze but can be regarded rather as a kind of door opener for the rich inner world of experience of the viewer. We can't actually enter these pictures with our eyes, instead they penetrate us like kinesiographs or cosmograms. That is to say, they make us vibrate in a certain way. Perception is to be understood here in its original meaning as *aesthesis*, the absorption of an energy impulse by the senses. The ethereal, watery quality of the blue in Rémy Trevisan's life cycle seems at first like a movement collecting and intensifying, then like a vital, even hectic impulse that knows no rest, and finally like energy dissipating. Blue is the colour with the strongest spatial quality, as Wassily Kandinsky put it in his theory of art: "The deeper the blue the more it beckons us into the infinite, arousing a longing for purity and the supersensuous. It is the colour of the heavens ... Very dark blue develops an element of repose."

Such an immaterial pictorial concept as this finds its equivalent - and maybe some theoretical foundation - in the connection between the principles of subatomic energy and the insights of Taoism and Buddhism, as shown by the physicist Fritjof Capra in his research since the 1970s or in Wassily Kandinsky's concept of the "Spiritual in Art" formulated as early as 1911. From the perspective of a holistic way of thinking, in other words, in a non-dichotomous view of the world, a distinction between outer and inner, object and subject, viewer and picture appears superfluous. If however - as modern natural science and Eastern philosophies propose - we renounce our handed-down notions of the self and the world, then customary perception fails, the normal idea of space and time ends and transcendental experience begins. To inspire this by aesthetic means remains one of the prime functions of art, even if in the past 200 years, in Europe at least and with few exceptions, it has subjected itself to the hegemony of materialist thought.

Although the discoveries of science have advanced to the tiniest particles of matter and the most remote corners of the universe, nature has lost none of its wonder and fascination, as Rémy Trevisan's installation entitled "Spiegelung" (Reflection) illustrates. The two wooden planks remind us of a botanical specimen that draws our attention to the richness of plant structures, in this case an oak tree trunk. The red and blue patches, branchings and growth forms are structured on the principles of division, rotation and reflection and can thus be taken as an analogy for elemental processes of growth and formation in nature. But at the same time, the twin forms of the tree trunk are also a poetic symbol of human beings' split condition, fluctuating and sometimes torn between a rational and an emotional pole as they shape their lives in intense alternation between earthly red and heavenly blue. To comprehend a work of art as a "reflection" on the oldest existential questions, however, we must be prepared to rediscover the slow gaze so that our eyes have a chance to widen and see deeper, enabling us as it were to encounter the universe and the Self.

Joachim Penzel