

Silvia Bächli in Venice

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by *Michael Semff*

The harmony that predominates in Silvia Bächli's installation in Venice comprises brightness and transparency, the white of the wall in combination with endless gradations of light grey. Grey that seems to be illuminated by the Venetian sky. Only seldom do they change into an opaque dark grey or indeed black, and the use of color is sparing – pale, as if filtered through milky glass. Bächli's drawing gestures generally have the character of a gentle, careful application, a fluidity as if saturated with water. Hardly ever – not even in the purest linear configurations – do we encounter the sharpness of a stroke.

This approach to drawing, or rather to painting with the facture of drawing, is devoid of all externality. It has always been direct, restrained and unpretentious, eschewing narrative verbosity. There is nothing premeditated about this approach, nor anything insecure. It is tentative in the sense of searching. The impression remains of astonishment at the fact that it is possible to set marks on paper so coolly, with such apparent detachment, so indirect in tone, which are nonetheless profoundly "touching", which communicate mental temperatures. The drawings do not confront us with seismographs; nothing gestural, psychic, nervous presents itself to our eye. What we seem to perceive is rather a breath, a minimum of movement, a wonderfully laconic "outlining" or "filling in" of formal developments.

Only sporadically does the artist permit herself to enter a creative dialogue, with terse memories of classical motifs in the work of modern artists such as Henri Matisse, as in a head shape in miniature format, or a monumental brush drawing of nudes bending backwards with parallel undulating lines horizontally traversing the sheet. Rather than having the purposefulness of a quotation or a conscious homage, these are evocations of reminiscences in the form of artistic elective affinities translated into Bächli's own personal language, reflecting a tacit appreciation.

Earlier, in face of the multipartite drawing tableaux of the 1990s, one could gain the impression of standing in front of a multipartite "puzzle", consisting of a range of mosaic tesserae of a similar tone which – quite unfinished – reflected nothing but the openness and inexhaustibility of perception. Homogeneity largely reined in the grouping of size relationships and intervals between the parts. In Venice, by contrast, the sections that initially appear most strongly disassociated suddenly exhibit an unexpected affinity, mutually attract and challenge one another. What at first glance appears divergent has an effect of consonance; the categories of "figurative" and "abstract" become interchangeable; the harshest of contrasts combine into a harmony. "Every drawing has a tone, has a tone color, a certain duration ...," as Bächli once noted. "After a long period of composition I prepare a precise hanging plan for what, from this point on, becomes a binding arrangement. Pauses and intervals are equally important ..." (Silvia Bächli, Notes 1997–2002)

In her recent works Bächli repeatedly stages a confrontation between quite different formats, juxtaposing the monumental with the miniature in a new way. By comparison to dark, positive forms standing as opaque surfaces with agitated contours on light-colored paper, her current work tends to be dominated by linear sequences, the emptiness of intervals, and abstractseeming contour lines enclosing negative spaces. Whether on the wall or in a vitrine, Bächli strives for constellations of

aphoristic sparingness, a sobriety that often approaches the “sacred”, tentatively interrupted by scattered color accents in a cool, watery blue, light greens or reds. In terms of harmony, these bear affinities with those lonely snow-covered landscapes of Iceland, photographs interspersed sporadically in the arrangement that set the tone like a tuning fork. These photos of a spacious, virtually infinite landscape space seem deprived of all illustrative function. They have the effect of distillations of nature in which time has come to a standstill, but which can unnoticeably flip over into an art form. Their close proximity to the drawings gives rise to suggestive emanations that mutually illuminate both genres. We sense how deeply the experience of Iceland must have affected the artist. In a series of drawings, horizontal formats evoking “landscape” dominate in a previously unprecedented way. In the context of a photograph showing a wide rivercourse and distant mountains, the immediately adjacent drawing of a “reclining figure” evokes a projection of a winter landscape, as imagination transforms the empty white paper surface into something legible as the form of an icy fjord. If we allow our imagination free rein, the gently undulating parallels of the brushwork behind the figure effortlessly call to mind the ornamental stylization of a woodcut by Edvard Munch, or equally, Giuseppe Ungaretti’s poem (“I would like to emulate this gently reclining land in its shirt of snow ...”). All of this remains in the associative vein, in the poetic vibrations that only serve to amplify the broad, open pauses and caesuras in the Biennale hanging.

Bächli’s “Venice Installation” can justly be viewed as a preliminary summing-up and at the same time as a reflection of the future prospects of her artistic potentials. Precisely in the context of the “landscape effect,” not previously so directly addressed by the artist, one is tempted to cite an approach akin to that described by Francois Jullien with reference to Chinese artists. Jullien noted that they think of landscape, “like everything real, as a reciprocal effect between poles, between above and below, vertical and horizontal, compact (massive) and fluid, impenetrable and transparent, immobile and mobile” – that is, in terms of dualities in an incessant exchange.

Silvia Bächli’s emphasis on “landscape” is given increased impact by the presentation of groups of drawings in horizontal table showcases. One could not put it more aptly than Hans Rudolf Reust, when he said that “over the drawings and their intervals” lies “a silence like that over a far-off landscape where much appears familiar yet is spirited into the distance by a profound muteness.”

The effect of being suffused by silence, muteness and distance, finally, is conveyed by the large vertical formats that dominate the walls of the main space at carefully calculated intervals. From the upper edge of these gigantic paper sheets “hang” narrower or broader sheaves of parallel brushstrokes, gently agitated as if by a barely noticeable draft of air, caught up in a sort of “energy-waft”: an “energy-waft that, spreading through the primeval Great Void, rises and falls and incessantly moves: this is the motive force of emptiness and fullness, motion and calm ...” (Zhang Zai). Or we may be put in mind of actually observed visual sensations such as the gentle wafting of thin, semi-transparent curtains seen in backlighting, permitting us to describe these works as veritably “veristic” tableaux. Still, Bächli’s highly tuned senses tend rather to trace a vague idea that finds form, takes on solidity in the course of working, or, as she herself put it in 2003, in “traces of a presence that at the moment of perception becomes fleeting again.”

Translation english version by John Gabriel