

## Fish in a sparkling whirl of colour

We're familiar with the great Berlin painter Max Liebermann's assertion that a well painted cabbage is of more significance to him than the stuffy museum filler of a Prussian general in his finery. The cabbage belongs in a museum, not the general. Liebermann did not intend this as pacifism. He was in harmony with the famous French painter Maurice Denis' saying that a picture is, before it becomes the fury of battle, first and foremost a certain area of canvas covered with a certain number of colours.

Why these two observations in the introduction to the work of a young painter who paints neither cabbages, generals nor the fury of battle? Because they remind us of something very simple, obvious even - that painting, above all subject matter, is first and foremost painting itself and nothing more. If Lars Reiffers dedicates himself for an extended period to painting dead fish or fishes heads, it is not due to obsession. He is simply recognising in this a rich challenge for painting. It has now carried his work into its fourth year. In Reiffers' work, fish skin can shine translucently, reflect like a crystal, sparkle like a prism, drip away wetly and blur and flow – all purely artistic procedures, from the richness of pure painting.

And the not-so-beautiful German saying, that a fish starts to stink from the head, is turned around into its opposite. The head literally blossoms, begins to decay in mother-of-pearl colour, to glisten silkily and to sparkle with brilliant reflections. Scales and gills become a bluegoldwhite phantasmagoria. The fishhead "Juicy" - a restrained, carefully toned firework of colour. The fixed gaze becomes a lens, in which red, yellow and green collect, shatter and sink down into the black hole of the pupil. This eye's expression, on the border of light and dark zones, is possessed of a bewitching power over life and death which haunts us.

Fish, at the end of the day, just fish. This motif took hold in 1999, while Reiffers was still studying in Aix-en-Provence and the stroll through the Mediterranean fish markets became an expedition for the camera. The earliest pictures were painted in the south of France. Then Reiffers swapped aquatic Aix for landlocked Münster. The motif came too. The canvas for the monumental fishhead "Juicy" hung for many months, between initial sketches and the final brush strokes, on the wall of Kuhna's painting class. First the picture was set out in flat spots. Later, the spots shone moist and slippery and were transformed, layer by layer, into bright, glistening fish skin. Light slid off over it, sank into the dark bottom, to be reborn with redoubled energy in the reflections. Over grey smudges came yellow patches, over the yellow, white highlights. A still life like a monument to a dead fish arose from the painting process.

The most exciting aspect was that Reiffers did not copy or imitate exact surfaces, that he, despite having the relevant models, did not require of his brush a photographic effect, but rather stuck with the elementary particle of painting - with the spot. His teacher Hermann-Josef Kuhna places this at the very heart of the sparkling cosmos of his pictures. For Reiffers too, the spot is the starting point for painting, as single-celled animals are the starting point for life. His "bold essence" (Theodor Hetzer) gives the pictures their artistic autonomy.

Nonetheless, Reiffers also creates illusions. His fish heads don't dissolve impressionistically into a haze of spots, which only become legible from a distance. This monument to a dead fish could equally be a portrait. IS equally a portrait, because Reiffers fetches his motif direct from the fish market, photographs whole series of shimmering scaly bodies, processes the photographs into watery glazes – then liberates himself entirely from photography into pure painting.

In the process something changes. In the same period as the fish head "Juicy" pictures such as "Goldfish" and "Blue Monarch" were created. From picture to picture, seductive as it might be to believe otherwise, there is no process of development. It's about polarity. Individual pictures become more and more abstract. The viewpoint comes closer, the field of view becomes smaller, the scales, though still rhomboidally correct, lose something of their animal presence and gain instead the serial rhythm of something structured. Fine streaks suggest a skin of scales in which light catches as if in a mesh. Shadows press forward. A subtle underwater game, which lies on the canvas like a vibrato, as if breathed there, generating a cool distance. The diamond of scales seeps away as a fleeting microstructure. Close up shifting into the distance.

The exhibition ratchets up the tension. The more the fish retreat into the abstract of the scales' ornamentation and the illusion diminishes, the more clearly the artist brings them back again. In the more recent pictures he counters the coarsely placed scales layered spot on spot, with tapered lily leaves or mallow flowers like white satin. Here, the paste in a relief that breathes colour, raised fishskin, there, thinly applied, so precise you could almost pluck them, in narrow stripes or in cloud-like abundance, the flowers. Artistically blatant verve and precisionist description - Reiffers raises the artistic bravado, by giving it various signatures. Individual pictures circle, moreover, around the old motif of transience. Red blossoms grow over a piece of fish skin beginning to decay greenly. A fish burns out in a final glow, the blue back alone retaining a trace of moistness. Even the vegetable – sickly redded peppers, darkly swollen pulses – gives itself up to dissolution.

At the same time, Reiffers is broadening his spectrum. He also paints the element of water and spreads a clandestine ornamentation over it. Once more, as with the fish, there is a cold blue, then a warm brown tone. The titles are "Cool sea" or "Ocean fire". Transported distances and foaming tides. Vanishing rings of waves and bubbling flamesprays. Reiffers adds remarks from Laotse, Heraclites and the psychology of the subconscious, for which water is a symbol of the unconscious. And the ornamental white highlights of the rocks on the bottom, the half seen curls or the swirl of white crests really do have something of a dream about them, which eludes fixed imagery. The water becomes – a little ostensibly? – the depths of the soul illuminated only by strips or scraps of light.

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