

Configurations of Desire

Image forms a structure for the paint, trans-figured via intuition and instinct. The 'subject' is painting, the subject is the artist, the subject is paint. What is the attraction of Peter Schmersal's paintings?

Yves-Alain Bois suggests that visual pleasure lies in the illusory spaces of the figure/ground relationship. For Bois, this pleasure is a frivolity to be avoided.¹ But why morally deny the pleasures of the paint regardless of specific context and content? Perhaps we should ask how is this visual pleasure constituted, how does it function and what does it do? Is it purely visual? It may be necessary to read closely.

The deep grey-green-yellow painterly marks of Goya's *La Duquesa de Alba y su Duena* are transcribed in Schmersal's *Die Herzogin von Alba und "La Beata" / nach Goya* and transfigured into shocking luminous magenta horizontal lines. The pigment's constituent shades emerge from the various thicknesses – from blackened pink at dense edges of brush marks, through vivid fuschia mid tones into bright pale violet transparency of thin peripheries onto slightly dirty, yellowed white. The magenta descends behind two figures over a halo-like negative shadow cast as white light behind and beneath them. The theatrical backdrop functions as a prop-like, contingent suggestion of pictorial space. The women are an aggregate of loose, wet, narrower strokes; swirling lines of fatty paint in rose, peach, pale blue, lilac, ochre, lemon, violet, cream and white flounces punctuated with black. They create pictorial tension against the ground-surface, opposing the monotone translucent striped marks with an opaquely heavy, complex knot of fleshiness.

Peter Schmersal's paintings are constructed from forms, conventions and, often, actual works from the history of painting – portraits, self-portraits, still lifes, landscapes, figures, tableaux and recurring motifs like flowers, legs without bodies, tables, beds (or rather, the same table and bed reiterated, differently). These images function as the overt content of the painting while structuring and mediating his visceral, material and libidinal responses to them. Intuition and instinct are neurobiological processes that analyse neurological and sensual bodily

¹ Yves-Alain Bois, *Painting as Model*; Mira Schor, 'Researching Visual Pleasure', in *Wet: Painting*,

data, recognizing patterns in order to interpret the world.² Schmersal's channeling of this information via forms that are recognizable and familiar models a reflexive set of responses that are both visual and physical.

The figure/ground relationship is an integral part of Schmersal's work, structuring the paintings. Although he works with a flattened pictorial space – the painted 'background' sits on the surface - the viewer is made aware of the paint's materiality. The marks are both physical and flatly decorative; illusory depth dissolves into the concrete depth of paint strokes. However the figure/ground interplay is not the only source of visual pleasure. Schmersal's technicolour Goyas become even more cartoonish, more figures of paint than the originals; the bleakness of Goya's colour is transformed and imbued with fleshy desire, in the pinks and purples of skin and bruises. There is a pleasure in the way the work appears to pulsate with the sheer joy of making, and a satisfaction in the material of the paint. There is pleasure also in the way in which the painting reinterprets a familiar image or form, in the meaty feedback loop running through these altered repetitions, the constant reference to the painting and the painter. This returns overtly as representations of the artist in multiple self-portraits, or is more obliquely manifest in works like *Mann im Spiegel*, *Waschbecken* - where the outline of a white square on a white ground contains a small hexagonal shape; a loosely depicted washbasin, a figure in the hexagon, and purple and blue shadows pull the image into the pared down pictorial space of a man in a mirror on an extruded wall with a sink. The pale, minimal space resembles an artist's studio. Other paintings repeat motifs of desks, desks with chairs, and beds that are reminiscent of studio furniture: equipment for work, thought and dreaming; intellectual and physical pleasures. Analogously, Schmersal gathers together optical and sensible data: gesture mediates vibrant and fleshy colour through the image and the sensuality of paint like bodily excretions.

Stephanie Moran, 2015

² Reza Negarestani, *Torture Concrete*, 2014.