

## TIM EITEL

"Great art is profoundly ordered."

"It is the extremely disciplined painting that I truly like."

"In truth I like very formal art."

Francis Bacon

The order of the picture begins as an ordering of emptiness. Initially, a few sharply outlined, mostly black and white surfaces are assembled. They almost function on their own: floors hone themselves on walls, beaches meet bright skies, shadows cut into lawns, more walls grow upwards.

Tim Eitel's fascination with rational structures is derived from his close observation of a specific piece of contemporary gallery architecture. The exhibition space was broken down into a set of photographs and later reassembled as an experiment in painting. Expanses of glass and steel grids supplied matrices which became reminiscent of the erasure of space aimed for by Piet Mondrian. What could be more natural, then, than quoting these motifs and thus conjuring up the original gallery situation, including its users? What could be more natural than reinserting the human form into this absurd collision of surfaces?

Tim Eitel's pictorial architectures, both the interiors of past years and the more recent landscapes, are based on the study of real architecture. And although they are often monumental and seemingly autonomous, they do not exist in a social vacuum.

How does the human figure fit into such overpowering constructions without being reduced to mere decoration? This question arises almost automatically when we are faced with individuals set against Modernist colour fields and/or serial settings. In current examples of this tendency<sup>1</sup>, impressive postures conjugate the relation of space and surface: masterful arabesques, formally appealing and dangerous at the same time. There have been comparisons with Mondrian's surfaces and of Caspar David Friedrich's lost figures against sublime backdrops<sup>2</sup>. But the intimate dimension, and with it the devoted treatment of the figure within a prescribed radius of activity, evokes scenarios from Francis Bacon. In Bacons' work in particular, geometric structures helped the protagonists achieve stability, although not in emotional terms. In Eitel's case, there is no solitude and isolation in the existential sense. Or at least such threats are not visibly apparent in the current mood of the protagonists, shining through instead in the cultural symptoms of isolation. For Bacon, the question posed itself of how to deal with figuration beyond a literal interpretation of pictures and their narrative aspects. The refusal to supply legible stories manifested itself in recurring structural components, in artificial podiums and arenas. Tim Eitel too applies this architectural strategy to his compositions. He is not interested in describable content or obvious metaphors. He considers artworks of the past not as stories, but as what he calls "contributions to a feeling, to an atmosphere". For the situations he depicts, he therefore aims for recognizable conditions or a specific life experience. Logically enough, his characters don't actually do anything, and their prototypical quality is reflected in their external attributes. They belong without exception to the younger generation, that of the artist, and wear identifiably trendy items of clothing. At first they appear alone, then conversing in pairs, and now increasingly in groups. Their relation to the above-mentioned settings is characterized by interchangeability and a lack of ties. With a few exceptions like *Bogen* (Arc, 2003), Eitel's creations are marked by a deliberate omission or at least obscuring of gestures and facial expressions. The young woman in *Bogen*, shown in profile, is exceptional in that she displays clear signs of mirth and could be assigned to the series in exhibition spaces, although there is no precise system of categorization. More interesting, however, is her position in the sparingly defined space: she stands in the centre against a curved wall, a motif that also shaped the works *Halbkreis* (Semicircle, 2002) and *Schwarzes Fenster* (Black Window, 2002). Tim Eitel is currently using curves to define surfaces in *Erwartung*

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<sup>1</sup> These include with works of the British painter Stephen Conroy (born 1964, cf. *Stephen Conroy. Retrospektive/ Retrospective*, catalogue, Schloß Gottorf 2003) and the Italian artist Margherita Manzelli (born 1968, cf. *Dreams and Conflicts. The Dictatorship of the Viewer*, catalogue, La Biennale di Venezia – Pttura/ Painting from Rauschenberg to Murakami, Venedig 2003, p.471)

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Christoph Tannert, *Tim Eitel 'Aussichten'* in: Tim Eitel, *Aussicht/ Outlook* (catalogue), Künstlerhaus Bethanien, Berlin 2002, pp. 4/5

(Expectation, 2003), a painting of a reclining young woman: the figure lies in a sort of circus ring, with a convex section of lawn in front of a dark strip at the upper edge of the picture reinforcing the impression of an arena. This oval shape is reminiscent of the way Bacon created ellipsoid stage spaces within the frame to highlight the action.

The laughing viewer of *Bogen* suddenly find herself in just such an individually lit focus of attention. In spite of the natural quality aimed for in these scenes, this motif in particular seems to owe its existence to synthetic transactions. Tim Eitel uses a stock of photographs he created himself especially for this purpose, removing individual figures from their original contexts. In spite of this, he finds it disturbing that even those not aware of this technique frequently draw comparisons with photography when speaking of this brand of detailed painting, leading Eitel to ask rhetorically whether, if Jan Vermeer were an unknown artist painting today, his works would be classified as photorealism? Ideally (and entirely unrealistically), he would prefer it if photography could be deleted from the repertoire of historical and cultural components used in the reception his work. An exercise in temporary amnesia ...

Tim Eitel arranges his figures either alone or in new constellations in their predefined setting. In a series of *Seascapes*, mostly without a view of the sea, male protagonists move along a sandy beach, barely competing with the dramatic horizon. Even when the wind ruffles their hair as in *Strand* (Beach, 2003) or they stride up the dunes (*Dünen*, 2003), their actions remain unspectacular, as natural as the landscape. Their shadows lead a sharp-edged life of their own, and there is no interaction whatsoever between the young men: the picture inserts itself abruptly into our field of vision, with no links to a communicative before or after. Very occasionally, there appear to be references across the oeuvre: the figure on the far right of the large-format *Boysgroup* (2003) could be leaning on the *Deck* (2003) before or after a sailing trip, perhaps. But ambitious projections on the part of the viewer are always thwarted by the self-contained attitude of Eitel's painting. To make surprising discoveries that go beyond narrative, interpretations must concentrate on the ambivalent atmosphere and pay unusually close attention to body language, as in the case of the group of girls entitled *Nacht* (Night, 2003). In what seems like an untypical style for Tim Eitel, foreground and background merge in a soft intermediate tone, not jarring on the usual rigorous outlines. The transition remains undecided, seeming to perfectly mirror the collective state of mind of the teenagers in the picture. Eitel abstracts from an everyday group situation, photographed on a city square, to show the essence of a specific age-group – without clichés or verbosity. The six girls are all caught in a floating condition between leaving and staying, between adolescence and maturity. Their stylish clothing in no way conceals the awkwardness of their body language. The claustrophobic character of this almost universal in-between moment is experienced subtly and directly, making it reminiscent of Francis Bacon, in spite of the coolness and polish of the overall style and in spite of the latter's greater emotional expressiveness. In this way, Eitel succeeds magnificently in portraying an atmosphere, logically building on the aims of *Boysgroup* or *Dünen*, with a strangely ironic gender segregation. Alienation from the surroundings and from fellow beings is carried to extremes in a perfectly casual way, distancing itself for the first time (in a convincing development) from the device of a constructed architecture or landscape. A few, almost clinical interventions result in a precise image of a social structure. In a near classic achievement of ordering, Eitel forces painting, and figurative painting at that, into a necessary and justified role as a subtle social and cultural thermometer.