

In the Force-field of Painting

Jens Hanke's Series

Secrets Dance on Their Own

In his most recent series entitled *Secrets Dance on Their Own*, Jens Hanke brings a choreographed ensemble of geometric elements to the visual dance floor. Not a randomly ordered series of brush strokes, not a painterly minuet, but a dance on the very edge develops on the canvas. This is especially powerful in the painting *Headache Since the Morning*: the beholder is drawn into a maelstrom of sharp cornered objects that form sharp angles and energetically drift apart. Manifold architecture-like components seem to rotate, shapes reminiscent of stars, airplane parts or earth satellites. A cascade of details that frequently overlap, crisscrossing the visual field, following a secret gravitation, the laws of which were set in Hanke's artistic intention.

“Die Module spielen verrückt” (“The Modules Have Run Amok”): this was the title of a catchy tune by the Neue Deutsche Welle band Paso Doble, a slogan that can easily be applied to Jens Hanke's painting. The Paso Doble song is about computer love: a paradox, one would think, since, as we all know, computers are unable to love (at least for now). Contrasts in turn take shape in many of Hanke's works. Architecture and nature, these are the two poles from which the lines of force in his painting emerge. Some of the techno-landscapes are reminiscent of romantic landscape painting, this is true of the works *How Did I Get Here* or *A Transfer Took Place*. The idyll is thwarted by contrary construction blocks that get in the way. But the cool colors, sometimes metallic, sometimes seeming poisonous, ensure that nature here appears as a defamiliarized or even threatening dream landscape rather than as a cozy scene. Hanke himself speaks of “landscape structures that have a tendency to sprawl.”

The Fascination of Architecture

Constructive nature: that is the common denominator shared by all the pictures in the series *Secrets Dance on Their Own*. The term “constructive” in turn leads straight back to architecture, which has long played an essential role in Hanke's paintings and drawings. This fascination for architecture, for the structural, has a great deal to do with his stay in Chicago, where the artist spent the mid-1990s as artist in residence at Columbia College.

The city on Lake Michigan, the birthplace of the skyscraper, in a way an open-air museum of modernist architecture, featuring high-rise giants by William LeBaron Jenney, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, or Helmut Jahn, undoubtedly represented an epiphany for Hanke's art.

From Reticent to Vibrantly Colorful

With *Secrets Dance On Their Own*, the artist returns to earlier charcoal drawings: consider for example the series *Mining Ground*, *Digging Field*, or *Island Me*. But the energy of the

dynamic graphic bodies is significantly amplified by the most recent works once more, on a scale from subtly-reticent to vibrantly colorful. The defamiliarized natural backdrop and the abstract objects form a force field that lends the images an amazing tension. If the architectural associations seem to refer first and foremost to the (built) outer world, these images possess at the same time an interiority that is hidden beneath the constructive shell. Interiority here means that Hanke is pursuing his own unconscious in his painting. Here, he joins a tradition that begins with the surrealists. If you ask the artist about what inspired him to his new works, he freely admits, "Basically, I have no real concept." He admits that the works "simply appear, without making a plan. Through the processual aspect, inspired by moods and a developed formal consciousness, I try to explore the world of the image, ultimately arriving at results that I had no notion of beforehand."

If not to reveal, but to illuminate somewhat the secret behind inspiration: this has frequently been the artist's motivation for working in his studio. Of course, he is not alone here. How to bring creative inspiration from inside to the light of day, how artistic illumination can be captured on canvas or paper, this is something that has always been of fervent interest to artists. Sigmar Polke mocked this theme of the creative with his irony: *Higher Powers Command: Paint the Upper Right Corner Black*, the title of a painting in which he makes fun of art world's cult of the genius. Hanke also wants nothing to do with "higher powers." "I believe in an inner cultural memory," he says, "whether it is genetically inscribed or operates otherwise: I try to submerge myself in these mental waters to bring a few fish to the surface."

On the Gradual Construction of Pictures during Painting

When considering the painting of Jens Hanke, who uses a rational arsenal of forms while at the same time drawing from inside, would it too much to think of Heinrich von Kleist? His essay "On the Gradual Construction of Thoughts During Speech" is not very far from describing Hanke's artistic intention. In this famous essay, Kleist writes: "But since I always have some obscure preconception, distantly connected in some way with whatever I am looking for, I have only to begin boldly and the mind, obliged to find an end for this beginning, transforms my confused concept as I speak into thoughts that are perfectly clear, so that, to my surprise, the end of the sentence coincides with the desired knowledge."

In the series *Secrets Dance on Their Own*, things follow a secret choreography that cannot be decoded, but at the same time seems so precise and precisely calculated that we think we see a strategy, a plan. But this is a mistake: the principle behind Jens Hanke's art is that his tautly organized images stake out straight lines, but also encourage our imagination to look and to think in all sorts of directions.

Jörg Restorff