



Reinhard Voigt: Hör zu

Is it all right to admire Switzerland? I am intrigued by this question when I look at Reinhard Voigt's works for our exhibition in Zurich, which depict women in traditional costume, flag wavers, mountains, flowers and views of lakes. The motifs stir memories of fresh air, peace, unity, a sense of tradition and the "pristine world" as a place that rouses longing. Is it all right to frame a picture of "pristine" Switzerland?

by **Susanne Neubauer**

In terms of cultural history, what is celebrated through an image or placed on a pedestal is that which is owed special attention — sometimes genuinely deservedly, sometimes surreptitiously. An outcry very often followed: Consider landscape painting, which raised the mundane to the subject matter of the ultimate discipline of all the arts. The originator of this "making a picture" is not unimportant in this context. It is usually the rulers who place themselves on a pedestal. It was audacious when Rembrandt painted himself or Dürer portrayed himself as Jesus. Today, everyone who would like to invest themselves with significance pictures themselves. Looking at the persona of Reinhard Voigt, I ask myself: Are there artists who refuse the picture, but nonetheless employ it as a subversive gesture? Yes, there are. Voigt is one of them.

Voigt was born in Berlin in 1940; he emigrated and returned. He is highly political in his work, although he does not really appear so as a person. His statements are precise and testify to a sharp eye. His work is almost unknown. I feel that this is because precisely these political, critical dimensions of the oeuvre he has created over so many years have not yet been properly recognized. Voigt's painting has been responded to as an expression of predigital abstraction with a tendency to design, the beautiful. We are in the 1970s and simultaneously in the present. Back then, Voigt wrote:

"I titled one of my pictures 'Sehnsucht nach Luxus, Ruhe und Wollust' [Longing for luxury, tranquillity and voluptuousness]. I am certain that, in doing so, I have named one of the central driving factors behind my work, and this title is applicable to everything I paint. Terms like 'grid,' 'mosaic' and 'knitting pattern' are often employed for my painting. In no way do I even want to refute that. However, because it only says something about the structures, I am not so interested in it. Only one thing really interests me: beauty."¹

Regarding the grid, Voigt says that he uses it as an object. The grid liberates him from the brushstroke, which never interested him. A seduction of the eye, like that found in Gerhard Richter's work, is not a matter in Voigt's pieces — and Franz Gertsch's photorealist grids of dots are likewise absent. Colors are a different topic. Voigt is kind of obsessed by them. He sees beauty, clarity in them. Color initially presented a challenge for Voigt. At the beginning of his career, his pictures were dark. With one square alongside the next, the representational object dissolved. Over time, he emancipated himself from the grisaille, his pictures became more colorful, the squares smaller and the motifs more nuanced. A preference for flowers, women and landscapes gradually revealed itself. Magazines or photographs often provided his source material.

According to Voigt himself, "context" is important and this is what led him to compose a photographic work "In Memory of Petra Kelly" (1993) or to "picture" Hanna Stirnemann-Hofmann (1969), the woman who beca-

me Germany's first female museum director in 1930 and served in that post until the Nazis forced her out.²

It seems that Voigt and women have always formed a fruitful pair. Voigt found a way of working based on the grid in the embroidered tapestries of his mother. If he had carried his pictures out with needle and thread instead of paint, I would need to write much more about the critical feminist aspect of Voigt's work, which is akin to that of Rosemarie Trockel. This reference point is absolutely important, because the female side of Voigt's art is undeniable. It marks a regenerative position within the often harsh collision of feminist and, many times, too strongly sexualized art of women. Male corporeality, like that realized in an almost palpable form in the paint of Chuck Close's pictures — not a chance in Voigt's work.

American "grids" are not really a point of reference either, even if they are an obvious and central motif in twentieth-century art, beginning with the European grid of the De Stijl movement or Zurich's Concrete artists and continuing all the way to the American grid of Ad Reinhardt, Agnes Martin and Sol LeWitt. "As a network of woven linen threads, the canvas they work on is 'already' a grid; adding another grid on top lets painters comment on the act of painting itself," in the words of American art critic Alina Cohen.³ As a "grid," the canvas provides an optimal basis for placing more "grids" on top of it, and this act becomes an exploration of painting as such. In this sense, Voigt is ultimately a "grid" painter to a certain extent, because the grid is a formal constant that he has never abandoned. The motif settles into the grid and becomes secondary, subordinates itself to it. However, this only occurs with the motif, not with the color, and for Voigt this is the more important part.

Even if Voigt insists that, in his painting, the grid is subordinated to the motif, I would counter this by saying it is the color that asserts its prominent place. It dominates the mood of the picture and constitutes its presence. Thus, it is also not entirely correct to place Voigt in connection with early computer art, all of which is "colorless" in the specific character of its typeface. Seriality is not an actual characteristic of Voigt's work either; he is thus distinguished in this respect from the Americans and the computer technicians like Vera Molnar or Frieder Nake. If American, then Voigt is a European Pop artist who took pleasure in selecting garish, "naive" motifs and corresponding colors at a time when the leftist RAF was terrorizing Germany. What is gaudier than Dutch tulips? And a Swiss girl in traditional costume?

Voigt attended the Academy in Hamburg from 1965 to 1971, because he wanted to study under Hans Thiemann, who had been a student of Klee and Kandinsky in Dessau. The time was ripe: Visiting instructors like David Hockney and Allen Jones were regulars at the HfBK at that time. Joseph Beuys was visiting and Voigt's canvases left him speechless in admiration

when he saw them. For the young art student, this was not just a formative experience but also a valuable signal that he should not question his own painting and his work at the easel. Although, after completing his studies, the Berlin native had exhibitions at the avant-garde gallery M.E. Thelen in the art metropolis of Cologne, and he presented his work together with Blinky Palermo, Rainer Ruthenbeck and others from the generation of German artists emerging at that time, Voigt remained a marginal figure. The reason for the distance?

Voigt had always challenged the canon a little, not just with his concept of painting and his choice of motifs, but also with mischievous ideas. As a student, he was denied a grant to travel to New York, which he had hoped to receive from the German Academic Exchange Service. When this could not be realized for various reasons, he suggested Switzerland — although there was no suitable art school there where he could have enrolled. Amazingly, the young art-school graduate was sent anyway and, in 1972 and 1973, he set out to travel and explore the country. His numerous stays there became seminal for Voigt, who had spent his youth in a Berlin still in ruins from the war. Petit-bourgeois Switzerland had been spared from the war, and the painter sketched and subsequently "pictured" it and its fine air in a kaleidoscope-like manner. Inserted into a grid. Broken up into little pieces. Reduced to its symbols. Its landscape dissolved into fields of color.

Voigt is still a Switzerland enthusiast today. He loves the Swiss accent. Switzerland remained a country that still stirs longing in him, although his journeys back then were short. Or perhaps precisely for that reason. What Voigt pays homage to is neither folklore nor ethnic Swissness. Today's world is dominated by autocrats, ignoramuses, profiteers, spin doctors and those who appropriate images for themselves and distort them for their purposes. Presenting this exhibition precisely at this time is a statement.

¹ Reinhard Voigt, catalog brochure, Galerie + Werkstatt e.V. Wolfenbüttel, 12.12.1975-25.1.1976.

² Stamm, Rainer: „Die Avantgarde der Frauen“, Frankfurter Allgemeine, April 3, 2018. As Johanna Hofmann, Hanna Stirnemann later served for many years as the head of the Deutscher Werkbund Berlin.

³ Cohen, Alina: „For Artists, Grids Inspire Both Order and Rebellion“, Artsy, 24.7.2018.

Translation from German into English:
Michael Wetzel

Front: *Senta Berger. Verstand ist wichtiger als Busen*, 1971, information sheet of an edition edited by HÖRZU, screen print, 77 x 59.5 cm. Courtesy of Reinhard Voigt and FELD+HAUS

List of works in the exhibition

Trachtenfrau im Hochgebirge, 1974
Oil on canvas, 200 x 135 cm

Senta Berger. Verstand ist wichtiger als Busen, 1971, information sheet of an edition edited by HÖRZU, screen print, 77 x 59.5 cm

Axenstrasse III, 1973
Pencil, colored pencil on transparent paper, 23.5 x 30.5 cm

Axenstrasse IV, 1973
Picture postcard, oil color, 10.5 x 14.8 cm

Axenstrasse II, 1973
Pencil, colored pencil, ink on paper, 21.7 x 28.5 cm

Jungfrauoch, 1972
Pencil, colored pencil on paper, 30.5 x 43 cm

Fahnenschwinger III, 7. Mai 1974
Pencil, colored pencil on paper, 29.6 x 21 cm

Fahnenschwinger II, 1972
Pencil, colored pencil on paper, 29.6 x 21 cm

Fahnenschwinger I, 1972
Pencil, colored pencil, ink on paper and transparent paper, 30.5 x 21.5 cm

Frühlingsboten am Wetterhorn, 1972
Ink and colored pencil on paper, 22.5 x 25 cm

Der Sonne entgegen, 1972
Oil on canvas, 86 x 122 cm

Zwei Schweizer Mädchen, 1974
Ink and colored pencil on paper, 22.3 x 21 cm

all works courtesy of Reinhard Voigt and FELD+HAUS

jevouspropose#9 Reinhard Voigt: Hör zu

November 24, 2020 - January 30, 2021

4 openings 6-8 pm
Susanne Neubauer, Reinhard Voigt (digital) and Sabina Kohler will be present

November 24, 2020
December 15, 2020
January 12, 2021
January 26, 2021

Please reserve a time slot for the openings via



@je_vous_propose Instagram takeover by Susanne Neubauer in collaboration with Reinhard Voigt

Opening hours
Thursday 2-6 pm and
by appointment



SABINA KOHLER • MOLKENSTRASSE 21 • CH-8004 ZÜRICH
JEVOUSPROPOSE.CH • INFO@JEVOUSPROPOSE.CH