

Karin Kutsch

Pigmente | Pigments

Exhibition text Pigmente | Pigments, 2019

Verein für aktuelle Kunst / Ruhrgebiet e.V., Oberhausen

The fact that Karin Kutsch forgoes any programmatic conception is unusual for a position that has devoted itself to colour as sole pictorial object. Commitment to a single experimental arrangement, frequently to be encountered in colour field painting and often run through over years, is not at the focus of her interest. For this reason, it is futile to search for a trademark which would, for instance, mark her out from her colleagues. Instead of employing a repetitive setting (only Black Pictures! Only Blue Pictures!) in order to guarantee rapid re-recognizability, she asks her interested public to tolerate the constant transformation undergone by her painting. At times she paints in oil on canvas, at times in acrylic, then again she uses aluminium as a support, and another time paper. An unusual wealth of variation can also be established in the manner of surface modulation, with the result that the output from one and the same year unites a broad spectrum of the most diverse works.

That this mutability has nothing to do with skittishness, but, on the contrary, distinguishes her work precisely as a result of a high degree of reflection is proven by a brief text which Karin Kutsch offers us in the stead of a conceptual rulebook, as a statement on her work:

*Potential lies in matter,  
is already concretely present in things  
and at base needs no other thought.*

(Karin Kutsch, Text 07.16)

With these few words, in brevity and ductus not accidentally reminiscent of a haiku, Karin Kutsch formulates the essence of her work. If it is the goal to bring to expression the intrinsic value and autonomy of colour and form as a phenomenon of a visual attraction in space with as little disruption as possible, concentration lies entirely on what is already in there. It is not necessary to have an overlying concept:

rather, that would be a hindrance, like an excessively tight corset from which one is advised to free oneself. Instead of pursuing a certain intention, absence of intention is the goal, the retraction of personal expression, of one's own pronouncement. Not wanting to say anything beyond the expression of colour. To create a void, which is filled with colour.

Of course – as always during concentration on the essential – the most minor decision has far-reaching consequences. What colours are used? In conversation, Karin Kutsch conveys a brief, but in-depth impression of her expertise in the simply immense diversity of colour pigments, the different groups – organic and inorganic, natural and synthetically produced – and their specific properties. Behind this examination we may assume some serious, high-level study. Theory and practice go hand-in-hand at the same time. Depending on their chemical composition, pigments have completely different properties, which remain concealed beneath the chromaticity and texture in their dry, pulverized state. Only upon solvation with a painting medium – oil or acrylic – and upon painting do they unfold their possibilities. For example, the stained glass pigments valued by Karin Kutsch react totally differently to oil and acrylic. It requires profound knowledge in order to create optimum preconditions for their intrinsic special qualities and to cause their wonderful transparency to shine.

Precisely in the more recent works, intensely colourful mineral pigments (cobalt, ultramarine) are frequently blended with organic pigments (cherrystone, grape seed black) in order to bring a greater depth into the colour. The repeated re-mixing of the paint for every new layer also contributes to the effect of depth, thereby resulting in natural modulations of the colour tone. The transparent openness of the surface is indebted to the fluid, glazing paint application. The light incidence in the paint layers is diversely reflected and kept in motion between the different layers and pigments. This soft inner motion of the intercommunicating pigments becomes palpable during contemplation. As a result, the pigment retains its vitality, which can be experienced only in front of the work and, naturally, is lost in reproduction. Activated by the respective ambient light (and its alterations), the paint surface unfolds an intangible spatiality, which, one moment, generates a kind of effect of depth, and the next, the impression of pulsating floating.

The yielding canvas on stretch frame offers, as the paint's support, different pre-conditions to those offered by a smooth aluminium plate. The paint adheres differently, it covers differently, the hand's movement is accepted differently and, not least, the way the light refracts depends crucially upon the support, from whose ground the light is cast back through the paint. The paint "stands" differently on hard metal than on the soft, structured canvas. When it comes to format, that is, the size of the image and aspect ratios, one factor comes into play which has not been mentioned hitherto, but which plays a pivotal role for this painting overall: intuition.

What size ratios have a harmonious effect for the relevant support? For the aluminium panels, Karin Kutsch opts solely for modest portrait formats and indeed predominantly – but not exclusively – in the dimensions 19.3 x 24.4 cm as well as 36.8 x 48.8 cm. For the new series, the individual formats have been chosen at a slightly smaller size, 16.7 x 21 cm. These portrait formats are derived from the classic sizes of head studies: they correspond to a counterpart at eye level and reflect our head area. One could say that their clarity and brilliance, but also mysteriousness and reserve aim at our visual sense and our mind in particular.

A subgroup is formed by a series of works on paper – all created in 2014 – which are mounted on aluminium. They surprise us with a completely different technique and a two-part division of the image surface. Papers dipped in oil paint are mounted in pairs onto an aluminium support. The pastel chromaticity corresponds to a very fine haptic sensitivity of the surface. It recalls material things such as leather or velvet and turns the panels into hermaphrodites between image and object. In the quiet dialogue between two colour values within one area of brightness, autonomy and equilibrium are celebrated not as contrasts, but as mutually conditioning states of being. Sometimes also under the condition that the whole tips 180 degrees and achieves balance as a landscape format.

The works on canvas are entirely different. The right format for Karin Kutsch for these is the square. Here, too, there are standardized sizes of 30 x 30 cm, 50 x 50 cm and 155 x 155 cm. Specifically with the large canvases, a pronounced corporeal dimension comes to bear here. Work takes place on the recumbent canvas. Access

is not frontal, but spatially possible from all four sides. There is no top and bottom – which explains the significance of the quadratic format. In the broader sense there is no beginning and end, no directed succession of the paint application from top left to bottom right. Kutsch works out of movement, out of her own inner centre in a situative painting process that is as little controlled as possible. The traces of this free brush movement are recorded as gestural structures, only condensing themselves into an impression of more or less pronounced homogeneity in the overlayings of many coats of paint. This type of physical work is reminiscent of dance or also musical improvisation. It connects space with the surface on which paint manifests itself as the sediment of physical experience.

Karin Kutsch's original field is architecture; she found her way to painting via the colour doctrines of Josef Albers and Max Bill. Her continued occupation with colour led her to the works and writings of Marcia Hafif and Agnes Martin. Out of these she developed her dialectic approach, which never considers the individual image as something absolute, but always as the outcome of the interplay of many factors, which continue to unfold their effect even after the artist has completed her work. According to her own definition, the work is "ready when it has reached a potential state that has its justification in this context." Not more and not less. The causal chains of its existence also encompass changeable factors such as position in the room, lighting, and the beholder's subjectivity. All this makes up the picture, and the more differentiated the specifications that it entails are (fineness of the colour gradations, sensitivity of the surface, the way lights adheres to the skin of paint), the more changeable is the relationship of tension between the image and its perception in space.

We are best able to perceive this dimension of depth in moments in which we are open, lucid and sensitive and empty ourselves of the inner monologues of mundane events. Conversely, though, the images are also capable of calming the mind, so that gradually the way is cleared for uninterrupted reception. Sensory perception then encompasses all areas such as sensation, mood, thoughts and body and gives us the experiential possibility to grow beyond ourselves.

Alexandra Cox, translation

Sabine Elsa Müller, author, art historian M.A.