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Seeing the paintings you've come up with for Los Angeles for the first time, I was quite struck. They appear absolutely new. Can you describe how they came about?

In the last years I was much occupied with the classical still life, especially the themes of Memento Mori and Vanitas you find during the Baroque. The different pictorial elements which I used were bound together by a gestural, yet controlled application of paint. My attention was focussed on creating space through painterly volume. I painted knuckle dusters, x-rays of animals, withering flowers, ancient vessels, and archaeological artefacts combined with lino cuts.

At the same time, I made the Camino pilgrimage from St. Jean Pied de Port in France to Santiago Compostela in Spain, an 800 km trail. On the Camino, you're out on the trail with nothing but your backpack. You step outside of society by changing location every day and carrying all your belongings with you. This gave rise to the notion of being an outsider or a social outcast. Hence the exhibition's title: »Pilgrim on a Hidden Path«.

Back at my Berlin studio I wanted to find a new pictorial form for my emotions and the sensations sparked by the historical sites and the experiences on the way. I have always employed graphic techniques such as woodcuts, lithography and dry point etchings. The immediacy and the possibilities of printmaking hold a great fascination for me. Thus, I tasked myself with clarifying and concentrating my painterly approach to three core elements: the dynamics of drawing, lino cut printing and the painted plane. Accordingly, I used motives from the walk for the new paintings: the discarded boot, the medieval girdle, vegetation and so on. And then I fused it into contemporary painting by utilising direct prints onto the canvas and oil sticks for the element of drawing.



In one moment the paintings are completely fragmented, torn apart, and scattered; in the other one extremely condensed and solidified.

Yes, this kind of push and pull is crucial. In this manner, the new paintings are an immediate reaction to the previous series with its spatial depth and volume. Furthermore, what manifests itself is the particular way in which I structure the motives upon the plane. Composition is crucial when everything is compressed in the centre of the painting. Still, in other works the centre is a complete void. To quote William Butler Yeats, all »things fall apart, the centre cannot hold.« This very oscillation between opaque / transparent, thick / thin, colour and contrasts is vital for keeping the painterly process alive ...

All paintings are kept in an in-between of concentration and dispersion but everything is integrated into one abundant pictorial field.

This has to do with my graphic approach. The lino cuts define and structure the overall composition. Only when I print onto a painted surface, the pictorial space starts to unfold. And with the use of oil sticks, I have drawn waving frames around almost every individual print. These hand-drawn elements extend themselves throughout the whole painting and tighten it with immense binding force. Besides, the lino cuts are »negative«, reversed images, so to speak. Line and shape are determined by what you cut away in the process – the void creates the images.

So amidst all fragmentation there is a binding force? Just like the ropes which reappear on several paintings.

I used to make very large watercolours, some more than 500 cm wide, which were shown at the Nordic Watercolour Museum in Sweden. The format was extreme. In order to connect the different motives, I employed quotes from »Soldier of Fortune«-magazines, lyrics, or tattoo lingo. I transformed the fragments into long bands of text swirling across the complete watercolours. The lettering was very crude or I intentionally misspelled words, thereby dissolving any literal meaning. The texts became textures and the individual letters abstract signs. And indeed, the rope or cord is a binding element in these works just as the text passages in the massive watercolours, ten years ago. The ropes are a reminiscence of my Camino walk. I saw countless depictions of committed pious individuals who had adopted the convention of wearing a knotted cord in recognition of the ropes which bound Jesus. Take the three knots you can see in some of the paintings. That's a friar's cord representing the vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience.

Speaking of technique ...

When I print directly onto the canvas I never know how the lino cut prints will turn out. A lot depends on the amount of colour and the pressure applied. This gives way for rewarding »accidents«, aesthetically speaking, and even though I'd call my practice conceptual mark-making it still originates in the individual painterly gesture.

These unintended mishaps or revelations I can't create consciously. Due to this, conceptual mark-making including printmaking crosses over into the department of gestural painting. That's the nearly magical aspect of painting. The best, the most convincing paintings come around when you least plan for it ... although, the worst paintings, too, I am afraid.

All the more, what about the motives?

The depiction of the human body holds great fascination for me. And using at least fragments of the human body also is a means to establish a physical or corporeal reality within the paintings. However, when I am showing different body parts they are closer related to anatomical renderings or an x-rays than to an actual solid form.

This immaterial presence of a body or even the virtual lack thereof is a persistent reminder of our fragile existence. Many motives are things that I encountered on the journey or function as symbols of certain emotional states I have experienced. By borrowing source material from high and low culture as well as by negating the distinction between the cultural values they encompass, these emotions gain an anti-hierarchical form of painterly contemporaneity.

Therefore, the motives can be emblematic symbols. Anyhow, they can only establish any meaning in the context of other signs. It's the interaction of signs that makes up the painting. Any painting is an overall system shaped and organised as a governing network of processes in which, on the one hand, the individual components are clearly traceable and, on the other hand, the same elements permanently establish this very network.

Mostly, I start out with a small pencil sketch of the structure in order to layout the basic composition. Nonetheless, in the actual painterly process I feel free to head into every which direction that the painting takes me towards.

