

Leaving behind – stopping to pause / On recent works by Reto Boller

Whenever I regard the works by Reto Boller at length, I forget that Reto Boller made them. In fact, I forget that anyone made them at all. They always seem to have created themselves. – To have, as the concept or condition or consequence of something else, searched out a space for themselves, staked out a place within its confines and developed their form from there. Some as far-reaching expanses of colour, others as a concentrate of acrylic and tough silicon. The first gleamingly smooth and radiantly light, the second heavy and like coagulated time, Boller's works only take up just as much space as demanded by the impulse inherent within them.

In the artist's studio and in his exhibitions, small, solidly dense formats and forms stand with equal entitlement next to widely spacious, thin-skinned works made of film and aluminium. Where both meet in a single work – the heavy and the light, the seemingly self-constituting form of an immanent force and the fineness of a cool but never cold precision – the result is a conclusive and beautifully articulated answer to the question of what painting can mean today.

Boller's works always possess very distinct painterly characteristics. The knot made of polyurethane (fig. p. 19) on an accurately cut board paints itself into the space, oily black and glistening like paint still wet on the canvas. This painterly quality is also exhibited by the tube-encased branches that the artist joined together in a self-contained fragile plait at Galerie Mark Müller (fig. p. 5). In both cases, the space serves as a sound box for a universe of forms in which concreteness and abstraction become directly interfused. In view of such works, the question of the boundaries between the two becomes obsolete. To the same degree that the tubing-sheathed branches asserts itself as an autonomous thing, as a spatial drawing and object with its own generative logic, the chair becomes a functionless and thus abstract creation.

No question: We recognise the motorcycle helmet on the aluminium panel as a helmet (fig. p. 4), but it is so much a part of this diffusely reflective wall, it comes off so directly and undeviatingly in the representation of a state of suspension, that it seems strangely unimportant what it might be, aside from form and surface. This helmet belongs there in the same self-evident way that the polyurethane knot belongs on the silver laminated board. Both parts of this floor piece determine and explain one another by taking up the properties of the other. The coarseness, the deformation, the denseness to the point of bursting of the one is answered in the certainty and the lightness of the other. In the reflection, the two become fused together. The board alone would be idiosyncratically beautiful but physically detached. The cast form alone would appear arbitrary and aimlessly lost within the space.

Of course, their interplay can also be interpreted differently: as a sort of bilateral infiltration.

The idea that Boller becomes impatient in face of the too smooth, too appealingly flawless surfaces and objects and acts in the process of creation to inflict the harsh, raw and unwieldy against it suggests itself in many of his works. The hinges crudely fitted into the mirrored wall, the roughly torn edges of the film, the scratches and frayed edges that can be found nearly everywhere in his objects all testify to a search for balance redeemed in the creative process. Now it is precisely the harsh, raw, unwieldy and seemingly uncontrolled elements that imbue Reto Boller's works with a strong physical presence because, in bearing the traces of being processed and worked, they reveal the constitution of the material and emphasise its haptic quality. (The autonomy of these objects is also founded in this aspect – in the individual injuries and irregularities.)

By contrast, the film and aluminium surfaces stretched with clarity of form appear disembodied, although they too are alive and breathing. Yet their aliveness is owed more to an exchange with that which lies outside. When one regards the way these gleaming surfaces of colour radiate

their aura into the surrounding context – and vice versa the way the surrounding context is reflected in them (fig. p. 6 and p. 14) or the faintly cast glow of the two aluminium objects painted on the back and leaned against the wall (fig. p. 13, top left and p. 21), it does indeed recall inhalation and exhalation, breathing in and breathing out.

Immediate physical presence on one hand, an immaterial aesthetic quality on the other. Seen this way,

Boller's works visualise two complementary states of being. A banging and breaking and bursting in one case, a thin vibration in the other, one could imagine the creative process as a continual interplay between furious intervention and cautious approximation. Yet Boller himself describes his work as a silent intermingling of intervention and omission: "The scratches are the traces of the fret saw, the rough edges are an act of omission in an otherwise ordinary work routine, the torn scraps of film are left behind remain because I discovered the quality of the trace. The bilateral infiltration (I like the term) is thus more of a leaving behind of something perhaps unfinished, a pause in the respective process, than an active revolt against perfection. More of a silent bilateral infiltration. I want to lose myself in the process and at the same time gain distance; within this contradiction, I circle around what I do not yet know little by little. My artistic intention thus often does not come until after the fact in the decision of whether or not something constitutes a gain and thus is able to remain. Seen this way, I am scarcely able or interested in planning the mutual infiltration."

The search for balance set off in the working process can hence perhaps be described as a balance between thoughtfulness in handling the material and the release of the material that finds its form itself. This release demands a renouncement that vanquishes artistic vanities at their core: the renouncement of a demonstration of the artist's own technical virtuosity. In the case of Boller, this renouncement of display, the omissions and this retreat behind that which arises from itself contribute substantially to the autonomous impact of the objects. When regarding much of contemporary painting, the suspicion often takes hold that the dashes of paint in an otherwise flawlessly painted picture only seem to have unintentionally arrived there. The superfluity of demonstrated ability is thus retroactively undercut by the little demonstrations of juvenile laxity. In the case of Boller, the abrasions and cracks actually do stem from the manner of working. Quite simply: "The scratches are the traces of the fret saw", nothing more. Neither perfection nor rebellion forms the theme of these works, but autonomy and authenticity.

When taking on the concept of authenticity, the question inevitably presents itself: authentic in what? To recognise something as real, as credible, requires corresponding parameters in that which is already documented.

What is authenticated is our world of physical objects, at least in their physical constitution. An abundance of literature has been compiled on the artistic exploration of this world of objects. Reproduction, abstraction, dissolution and negation are the four cornerstones of the playing field on which the investigations are conducted. If attempting to situate the works by Reto Boller on this playing field, which corner, which boundary zone should be defined? For my part: a shrug of the shoulders and the suggestion that they be ascribed as such to the world of things itself.

Of course, Boller's objects belong in a different category than a table, a chair, a helmet. They are substrates of the objective, consequences of everything the artist sees and thinks. They are forms that emerge after everything has gone through the filters of his gaze and his reflection. These filters do not mask out the object nature, they do not attack it, nor do they alienate it. They generate something new and place it with equal rank next to that which already exists. This specific approach even allows works to occasionally exhibit similarities with things that are

already known – the wired wall piece, for instance, that recalls a plasma screen (fig. p. 9). Like the direct incorporation of functional objects into the free form, the allusion of the free form to the concretely objective can also be read as a rejection of obsolete conceptual structures and ideas.

With this dissolution, the field of possibilities is expanded many times over, both for the artist himself as well as for us as viewers. When art no longer has to get hold of the world of things in order to assert itself against it, when it can incorporate it, without that being a necessity, when it can abandon the meta level assigned to it despite all the desirable reflectiveness and develop an original form at eye level with the rest of the world (simultaneously concrete and abstract), then this means: a greater freedom in beholding.

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