

Intensities of Colour

BY ROBERT FELFE

“A colour known as verdigris is green. It is very green by itself. And is manufactured through alchemy, from copper and vinegar. This colour is good on panel, tempered with size. Take care never to get it near any white lead, for they are mortal enemies in every respect. (...) And if you wish to make a most perfect green for grass; it is beautiful to the eye, but it does not last.”

Cennino Cennini, *Il Libro dell' Arte*, Cap. L.VI

In the history of art there have been very different ways of understanding and reflecting on colour and its status. Since the late Middle Ages, easel painting has played a major part in this context. Among the complex working methods of a workshop, the preparation of pigments was quite literally a fundamental area especially given the fact that for a long time the material worth of colours greatly influenced the price being negotiated for a painting. Knowledge and experience in the handling of colours was passed down from one generation to the next – on the one hand through practical instruction, but also increasingly through manuals like the above - mentioned *Libro dell' Arte* by Cennino Cennini, written just before 1400.

If colour has developed its own sophisticated semantics within the fine arts, then to a certain degree these conventional meanings were extrapolated directly from the preciousness of the used substances. Examples for this are the gold grounds of Christian paintings as an appropriate space for the manifestation of divine light; or the intense purple which was extracted from a rare snail of the murex genus (spiny dye murex) and which had distinguished the dress of dignitaries and rulers since antiquity.

Yet another strand in the creation of meaning of colour can be traced through the history of art. Especially during exceptionally innovative phases in the history of painting, for instance around 1500 in Italy, or around 1650 in the Netherlands – unique powers and capabilities were attributed to colours. On the one hand, these were natural characteristics and abilities: colours had preferences and enmities amongst each other, pharmaceutical as well as toxic effects, they transmitted various intensities of light, which were often thought of as direct impulses of movement. Entwined with these apparently strange characteristics were other perceptible qualities of colours, for instance the sensation of warmth and coolness, softness and hardness or the lively impression of flesh tones. What we are accustomed to perceive as mere aesthetic qualities today, attributable to our subjective experience, could indeed not be thought of without the latter. All the same, even in European art we find significant traces of a lively relationship between these qualities, including their potentiality for meaning, and nature. According to Ludovico Dolce, a contemporary and admirer of Titian, colour shared in the life sustaining, soulful power of all objects that were called *vegetativa* by Aristoteles.

These briefly outlined aspects provide a historically far -reaching space of resonance for Rupert Eder's art. Through their connection to these often forgotten traditions his works take a very unique stance in relation to contemporary art. In particular, twentieth century colour field painting is taken on and transformed. The former's programmatic renunciation of any figurative depiction and narration is doubtless also among the premises of Rupert Eder's work. If Clement Greenberg, on the basis of the incontrovertible two – dimensionality of the painted image, had elevated flatness to an objective aesthetic norm for painting, then colour was its true substance. The consequence of this was that colour fields in their turn were regarded as ultimately the only adequate subject of this art, while in abstract art of the 60s, artists were looking for ways to subordinate any form within a painting to the free effect of colour. Of course, historically, this pointed emphasis would have proved

a dead end for painting, and its claim to general validity has long become obsolete in light of the breadth of contemporary tendencies.

Rupert Eder works as it were with this caesura at his back and wrests from it a new tension - filled openness for his painting. Too often a worn out concept in art criticism, in regard to Eder's work *experiment* takes on a special role. From early on, variations of the *Rotoren* (rotors), for instance, have developed a single clearly recognisable principle in constantly changing form. (see p. 10 et seq.) Each of the centred modules is set into cyclical motion – against the supposed stability of square and rectangle. The inherently stable structures of form are thus made visible as the traces of the application of paint; and in these sequences of movement, the colours unfold their own force fields. Centres build up, which do not converge with the fixed centres of the forms' schemas. The opaque density of monochrome segments contrasts with the accelerated parts where distinguishable brush marks adumbrate transitions and mixtures. Precisely here, an overlapping of colours, suggestive of different temperatures, occurs, transparencies result and space is opened up. These spaces do not observe the image's planar grid logic, but transcend the ground's plane. Here it is primarily the materiality of the colours, their resistance to an uninterrupted transition from one pure state into another, which engenders the process of transformation. If the variations on this theme keep attempting to achieve a new balance between control and openness, then this is the main challenge driving the painterly mark making. But in this – fortunately –, the paintings do not come to rest. It rather seems as if they were possessed of self – knowledge that colour cannot be permanently tied into the formal structures of the *Rotoren*.

This precise idea is pursued in a more recent strand of Rupert Eder's painting. In greatest possible contrast to the grid shaped surface design of ground plan and formal structure, now undulating curvatures become the dominating repertoire of form in many paintings. The release of a long since discovered dynamics was first tested in the experimental area of water – colour. (see p. 80 et seq.) Its materials are comparatively easy to handle and here free movement becomes a dominating principle for form as well. The design in these *Schlingenbilder* (loop paintings) is arrived at primarily through a handling of the brush as continuous movement in space. Each emerging form is then first and foremost the trace of a movement that has evolved from the circle. In the early watercolours from this group (see p. 108 et seq.), autonomous colour pools form an opposite pole to this principle. But these opposite poles are increasingly assimilated. More and more decisively, the *Schlingen* (loops) themselves are executed as the uninterrupted continuous form of individual brush strokes and, if other elements are involved, these form themselves into circles, which in their turn pick up on the motif of rotating movement as closed form. A common factor in these works is the way in which the discovery of form and colour are playfully and tirelessly combined. - In more recent paintings, this aspect of a variation on a theme is taken further in oil painting on canvases. (see p. 58 et seq.)

If colour, form and movement have for a long time constituted poles of tension in Eder's painting, then his works of the last two years open up further areas. Since 2010 the paintings' grounds have been opened up and newly defined. Paintings in oil – *Schlingenbilder* as well as *Farbrotoren* – have since then been painted on canvases prepared with a transparent ground. This way of working in oils finds an echo in a changing mode of working in water - colour. Here the increasingly complex clusters and webs of individual brush strokes were cut out and these interrupted works were then placed on empty sheets of paper. (see p. 118 et seq.) Already implicit instances of contrast were thus newly accentuated in both media.

The abstract figuration is purposefully isolated in these paintings. The interplay between ground and posited shape appears now as a dynamic polarity between positive and negative space. What is literally true in the water –colours is also being communicated in the aesthetics of oil painting: The consequence of the enforced emphasis of form is that the perceptible qualities of colour take on a virtually three - dimensional presence and thus transcend the supposedly definitive conditions of the 'only' two – dimensional image.

This release of colour is further supported by another factor, which becomes most evident in oil painting. With the canvas' s texture and colour visible, the material qualities of figure and ground meet abruptly. The canvas, thus left bare, is concrete in its materiality and in its fabric we reencounter the grid structure as an ordering principle. At the same time this ground retreats optically, it creates more of an ambient space than a hard surface. Both – canvas and figure – thus confront each other and us as things *sui generis*. Consequently, the lengthy preparation of used colours becomes part of the aesthetic of the painting. A range of pigments and additives like metal powder, mother – of – pearl, lamp black and various chalks form the body of colour, which emerges on its own, beyond any figurative depiction.

This physical, material component manifests itself in yet another way in one of Rupert Eder's most recent bodies of work. In certain areas in the large - scale watercolour series *spirit paintings* and *ghost paintings*, liquid colour itself generates visible forms. Free flowing brush marks cooperate with the inherent movement of the colours' substance. Its fluid movement covers the intentionally painted form and creates its own – more organic seeming figuration – as a result of uncontrolled currents and sedimentation in the micro landscape of the painting.