

Over the past 15 years, the Swiss artist Patrick Rohner has created an artistic oeuvre, a continuous ongoing project, that is far from complete. On being confronted with works of such immense density and such a commanding, forceful presence, viewers may on occasion feel overwhelmed. The artist's work directly activates and challenges our sense perceptions so that we are called upon to react.

People today seem to have become thoroughly accustomed to the relentless flood of images and sensual stimuli. On one hand, they have acquired the ability to see indifferently; on the other, they have mastered the reactive skill of rapid selection – two “survival strategies”, which are also applied to the viewing of art. This visual flexibility may be necessary in daily life in order to cope with the endless array of visual impressions, the torrents of data and simultaneously unfolding events with which we are inescapably confronted. When it comes to the appreciation of art, these techniques may not be quite as beneficial, especially since they are often paired with rash acts and judgements.

A fleeting glance at some of Patrick Rohner's works creates the impression that the artist has applied paint to his picture support with the naïveté of a child at play, disregarding habitual visual conventions and without aspiring to recognisable motifs. We see rectangular planes, some with solid lumpy paint, others with flimsily painted surfaces or paint that has fallen off. Sometimes the layers of paint appear as jagged, bunched concentrates; sometimes they are barely perceptible, ephemeral layers resting on the surface or softly hovering in the background. The haptic shapes and structures are visually legible, but they elude precise verbal description. Conceptual attempts instantly lead to an inescapable dead end, which inevitably compels us to abandon a semiotic reading in favour of a pragmatic one. Obvious associations with abstract landscapes or comparison to nature's geological processes immediately come to mind and just as quickly make us realise that far more complex and sophisticated issues must be at stake here.

Landscape – Paint Structure – Paint Landscape:

Having graduated from the art academy in Düsseldorf, Rohner moved to the Glarner Hinterland where he produced his first paintings. They show hints of horizontal lines and diagonals, evoking the illusionist character of a landscape in perspective. In Rohner's oeuvre as a whole, it is these pictures which most clearly convey the impression of a landscape. The gaze is directed at an unplaced distance. Even the smaller formats show a remarkable sense of depth and volume. Tones of green and brown dominate. Characteristic of this

time is the use of a wide paintbrush that seems to plough and cultivate the picture plane with increasingly lively and dynamic brushstrokes, pushing both paint and picture support to their limits.

A group of works follows in 1993 that stands in great contrast to the preceding one. The surfaces of the paintings, although still produced with a paintbrush, resemble the structured surface of a masonry wall. The gaze – previously directed toward a distant vanishing point – is now focused on an extreme close-up view. The application of the paint, underscoring its materiality, and the horizontal layering confront viewers with an immediate impression of visual weight and oppression. An impenetrable wall of colour rebuffs the viewer's gaze. Patrick Rohner has reached a decisive moment in his artistic development. The feelings of constraint and anxiety that dominated perception now recede although the picture frame focuses on an increasingly limited range of vision. This is to develop into one of the most important constitutive components of Rohner's painting.

In 1995, the artist uncompromisingly abandons the use of the paintbrush, for the brushstrokes reveal a conventional ductus. Instead he develops a system of technical processes that allow a matter-of-fact, detached application of the paint. Rohner works increasingly at eliminating his influence on the composition of the picture. The material's own evolution replaces the painting subject. The pictures look as if they have painted themselves, as if they have evolved naturally. Only much closer study and detailed knowledge of the technical work process enables the viewer to recognise characteristic traces of the work process. The individual signature of the artist has not vanished after all!

Empty spots and unanticipated events in the process of applying or transferring the paint, as well as single patches or entire layers of paint, affect and disrupt the application of subsequent layers. The "mistakes" become increasingly forceful, as the picture progresses, until they reach the surface and influence the genesis of the work. The vibrant structure of mutually oscillating and interacting layers of paint generates a dynamic that resonates down to the earliest layers of the paintings.

The artist's attention shifts increasingly from the macrocosm to the microcosm. His gaze no longer strays off into the distance nor does it cling to the surface; instead it glides under the layers of colour and probes hitherto hidden territory. The space of the picture becomes a narrowly defined field, hosting increasingly complex and sophisticated investigations. Although their range of vision is increasingly restricted, the works are hardly "short-sighted". On the contrary, their great sculptural density testifies to a highly cultivated intensity of perception. The surface structure shows a complex stratification and plastic volume. The viewer is no longer repelled but is now able to penetrate

the topmost layers in order to read the strata underneath. The “inner networks” and structures, which become visible, themselves constitute the “external, visible reality” that we see on the surface. This “un-folding” of paint layers creates a new perspective on an unmistakably new pictorial reality.

Viewers must first get used to the unusual tactility of these surface structures, for they are almost impossible to reconcile with previously experienced pictorial structures. Rohner’s pictures have entirely jettisoned a goal- or purpose-oriented mode of seeing. The process of seeing takes longer. The gaze becomes entangled in the jagged, rent and riven surface, more frequently encounters resistance, falls into deeper regions and plunges into gulfs and crevices. Time and again viewers find themselves wandering about so absorbed in these autonomous paint landscapes that they unwittingly lose their way. The pictures show neither a distinct central focus nor any other kind of traditionally legible compositional structure. It is therefore impossible to read them as we have learned to in the West, namely, from left to right. No hierarchical structures come to our aid; all the constituents of the picture and its layers of colour are equal and equivalent.

The form and essence of natural growth, its ramifications, but also its dynamic displacement, transformation and destruction can, in the long-term, be rendered artistically only if the shape and design of living forms and those of artistic creation are able to establish a genuine mutual rapport. Rohner’s paint landscapes do just that, and with great mastery.

Paint – Light – Space:

Patrick Rohner’s approach demands ceaseless and profound awareness of the momentary state of a work in progress. He allows his paints the time needed to consolidate on the picture support – a process that he observes and studies. In addition, he must make ongoing decisions as to whether the picture “works”, both in detail and as a whole. Every single element of colour and shape has to find its proper place within the picture plane and therefore its own necessary justification. The artist meticulously examines every picture over a long period of time. This observing, explorative approach may take weeks, months or even years. The artist’s observation is subject to stringent categories of self-imposed objectivity and impartiality. In the final stage of the artistic process, the artist decides whether the picture is finished or whether work on it will continue.

The thick picture support, which lifts the painting away from the wall, and the jagged paint surface contribute substantially to the dimensional feel of the work. Patrick Rohner rarely uses square formats; as a rule he prefers horizontal rectangles. He thereby undermines the potentially static effect of a picture. He additionally underscores the dynamic nature of his work by

extending the paint beyond the picture plane: it literally reaches out into real space. Matter and light play across the buckling and furrowed surface. It seems as if there were a subtle source of light within the paint itself – a softly embedded and supple illumination. The light is not merely “reflected”; it “emanates”. The layers of colour in turn produce a sequence of distinct properties: for example, glossy, mat or grainy. Some pictures may have a mat, brittle and cracked surface structure, while the layers underneath appear juicy and succulent as if they had just been applied and had not yet dried. In other pictures, the sequence may be reversed.

The vagaries of daylight dramatically demonstrate the impossibility of imposing a clear-cut interpretation on Patrick Rohner’s pictures. Changing reflections and shadows profoundly alter the vibrating character of the entire paint-scape. The eye of the holder is ceaselessly challenged anew. One and the same picture must be probed time and again, for it cannot and will not yield a final impression. The picture structure is open-ended. The picture remains rooted in the present and unequivocally asserts its autonomy. Patrick Rohner’s painting requires close study and the ability to decipher the visible. When visual dependability fades, when clear reference to depictability no longer prevails, “seeing” once again becomes a new, impressive experience.