

Patrick Rohner – A Lesson in Perception

'Realgar', the most recent exhibition of one of the most skilled contemporary artists yet to be massively discovered.

Galerie Mark Müller has since 1990 quickly established itself as one of the most interesting and distinctive galleries in Zürich, with a fresh, inspiring and radical approach to a range of contemporary abstract and conceptual art positions. Most of the artists represented by the gallery explore and fathom the relationship between media painting, drawing and sculpture between the artwork and its surrounding space, as well as an unusual and unique handling of different techniques and materials, offering new ways of perception. Amongst them are nationally and internationally very prolific artists such as Joachim Bandau, Reto Boller, Katharina Grosse, Marcia Hafif, Joseph Marioni, François Morellet or Patrick Rohner, whose sixth one-man-exhibition was recently shown.

Since his very first exhibitions in the early 1990s Patrick Rohner (1959) has been known for his reflective, inventive and radical painterly approach and the manner of showing his works in the 'white cube'. Before we take a closer look at his works, it must be noted that their presentation is just as important. The installations clearly prove that Rohner has once again found an intelligent way to introduce and guide the visitor towards a deeper understanding of his work without being didactic or predictable. In the entrance hall the visitor is welcomed by a medium-sized painting and a realgar—a mineral, whose colour's intensity gradually fades out when exposed to light—in a small showcase on a base, emphasising his elaborated and deep interest not only in an art historical but also in a scientific and philosophical interrogation of his own work, his understanding of art and the world he lives in.

The following large room of the gallery is sparsely populated by three large new paintings. Looking around, the visitor's eye promptly runs into a wooden box, inserted there by the artist, that seems somehow misplaced, as its presence prevents an overview, and also seems to be completely closed. Only by moving around does one notice the rather narrow entrance, facing towards the glass door of the courtyard. Three recent watercolour paintings of impressive size are hanging on the outer walls of the box. Patrick Rohner shows these stunning works here for the very first time. Observing the inside of the box, the visitor is confronted with a dozen small drawings. Each one is the result of a meticulous and perceptive process of precise analysis of an oil painting conceived by the artist. In this way, these drawings are not just preparatory sketches of paintings, but a transformation of them into another medium, equivalent to the paintings.

This deliberate sequence of the works is crucial and gradually leads to a better understanding of the artist's work and intentions. Without forcing the onlooker with a determinate course, it's up to them where they set their gaze when looking at the works. The interlocking of the pieces appears completely natural and not laboured at all. Thus, in three loose steps the onlooker is perfectly guided from oil painting to watercolours to drawing, and vice versa. To some visitors the raw impasto of the surface of the paintings might be somewhat irritating in the beginning, but rather quickly, after a couple of minutes one becomes accustomed to viewing these unique works. Then you can switch your gaze from one work to the other, *seeing* with your own eyes and grasping that everything in this body of work is connected in a logical and comprehensible way.

The three large horizontal format paintings (one of them measuring 170 × 250 cm; the other two 180 × 310 cm)—all of them untitled, but precisely dated and numbered, as always in Rohner's work—consist of the characteristic relief-like impasto of numerous layers of paint of linseed oil mixed with pigment and applied on plywood. The paint is applied in manifold and complex techniques like pressings, layerings and transfers as well as treatments with palette knives, brushes and other tools. The process of the work and observation lasts several months, sometimes even years, until a work leaves the artist's studio. The technical procedures are not only physically demanding but require an in-depth knowledge of paint and colours and how they react under extreme circumstances. The paint is massively exposed to physical laws and slips, cracks, breaks off and falls apart, flows. But the final results are much more subtle, sensitive and certainly not arbitrary, than may be expected from the description of the working process.

Whereas in previous works the different technical steps were mostly visible, the recent paintings show a completely different quality. Now, even for a knowing eye it becomes difficult to be able to always identify the individual technical interventions. Despite the fact that in the new works the paint is often distinctly less thick than in previous ones, they gain an enormous density. All the different layers of paint and technical processes appear interlocked and look like a natural grown coherent entity. And this impression convincingly works towards the artist's interest in geological phenomena that he observes in his surroundings in the mountains of Canton Glarus. Therein lies also the importance of Patrick Rohner's individual approach: it is not only a unique and personal contribution to the classical and traditional genre of landscape painting but goes far beyond this range. In the new works spatial shifting and different perspective views, horizontal divisions and atmospheric effects evoke comparisons and similarities with the landscape. But a mimetic depiction is not intended. The artworks gain a convincing structure and an autonomy and reality of their own, creating synergies between our experience and knowledge on art, landscape and nature's processes and unexpected and surprising new insights caused by the immediate impact of these works.

The same can be experienced when viewing the new watercolours (the largest are of an impressive size: 145.5 × 103 cm). They are conceived through a constant process in which the paper is literally bathed in dissolved pigments. During a delicate period of drying they gain their specific materiality. From the distance they look like a bird's-eye view of a landscape; from close up they reveal the density of the various layers of paint. The ink pen drawings inside the cube are shown in chronological order, better revealing their analytical character. In each of them, the artist examines the structure of one of his oil paintings with precision. This unusual and surprising inversion of the classical relationship between drawing, sketching and painting leads the onlooker to some eye-opening conclusions about the artist's body of work and helps them acquire an understanding of how a picture can be read and understood.

Patrick Rohner's work is not limited to painting and drawing. He is active in the field of photography and film as well and from time to time even conceives three-dimensional objects made completely out of pressed and dried layers of oil pigment. A glance at his [website](#) proves just how artistically and technically outstanding these works really are. They belong to one of the most skilled and perceptive contemporary artists whose versatile and fascinating work is still to be discovered.

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