

The Mountain Has Born an Elephant
Gianni Jetzer

On the back of the extensive canvas the word “BODY VII” is written by hand. The canvas depicts a majestic rock with a small picture of a Madonna peeking out of its centre. Despite the chunk’s sheer physicality the subject somehow does not really seem to suit the title.

Josef Felix Müller overpaints his pictures in many layers; as a painting process (the artist has counted up to 46 new overpainted layers on the same canvas¹) or as actual recycling. A subject group which has lost its validity disappears behind fresh layers of paint – in this case bodies turn into landscapes. The tension between the front and the back of the above-mentioned canvas marks a turning point in the artist’s work; it represents a new point of view, even a different perception of time. These discontinuities suit the image of Müller’s personality as the uncompromising, at times provoking contemporary who creates his art from immediacy with passion and determination.

Müller became internationally recognized through his “pictorial metaphors of interpersonal relationships that compulsively undisguised and not accidentally in ‘real life size’ flow across the canvas – yet following strict compositional rules.”² After he discovered wood sculpture for himself in 1982 he neglected painting and drawing because he considered the figures as not being physical enough. The fact that his return to painting goes along with a radical change of the subject even leading to a complete renunciation of the human figure seems only reasonable within this position. Sculpture was the definitive medium for his figurative work phase whereas for the mountains it was obvious to him that they wanted to be painted.³ Apart from the change of the subject and the relevant medium his new works also display characteristics that are typical of Müller’s position: for example the discourse with the entity of time, the examination and the competing with pictorial tradition from the history of art, the design of metaphors turned

¹ For the overpaintings between 1979/1980 see: Jean-Christophe Ammann, Josef Felix Müller, *Kunst-Bulletin* No. 5, May 1981, p.1.

² Toni Stoos, “Felix”, *Sechs Augenblicke der Begegnung mit einem Wesen der dritten Art*, “Ad personam”, in: *Parkett* No.2, p.95

³ “If I feel like it I can simply let it snow. A conversation with Josef Felix Müller about his Alps paintings,” Samuel Herzog, in: *Catalogue Deweer Art Gallery*, 2002, p. 10.

into pictures and archetypical contents as well as the persistent holding on to compositional or at least conceptual rules.

In 1999, shortly before Felix Müller embarked on the month-long painting process of the first large Alps painting, the St. Gallen media scientist, Peter Glotz, published his book *Die beschleunigte Gesellschaft – Kulturkämpfe im digitalen Kapitalismus*. Here he analyses acceleration as a “base trend of economy marked by modern information technology.” Contrasting these developments Müller chose a form of work, which from an economic point of view is either extremely lavish or on the contrary compresses time to a pictorial formula, making it usable as a reservation: “From a simple click of a photographer I create a multi layered time picture during a month-long painting process.”⁴ Thereby he joins a counter movement to Glotz’ position. The deliberate renunciation of accelerating efficiency becomes an artistic standpoint, a self-chosen isolation as a basis of artistic research.⁵

In viewing Müller’s paintings there are various levels that differ in time: the view from a distance arouses amazement about the plasticity of the painted surface – an effect that usually is only fleetingly perceived. At mid distance, however, the paintings can be viewed almost endlessly. They become a visual field that removes real time. The gaze becomes transfixed for a long moment, the exit from the image is consciously perceived – like rubbing ones eyes after having been to the cinema in order to get used to everyday distances again.

Unlike the Alps pictures, which have been painted from photographs in books, the images of forests and springs have been made with the help of digital photography. On his excursion in the woods or to a spring Müller captures a moment or a certain light atmosphere, briefly checks them on the screen and then converts a small format print into a large picture in his studio. As is generally known, landscape painters in the 19th Century had already been using photography as a painting aid. Robert Zünd, for example, used a camera given to him by the Winterthur merchant and patron, Theodor Reinhart, for photographic sketches. The detail accuracy of his paintings matched that of a photograph. During the National Exhibition in Zurich (1883) his black-and-white reproduction of an oak forest was mistaken for a photograph.⁶ Müller’s handling of the interface

between photography and painting is radically different. While the Lucerne painter laboured with the depiction of every single leaf, Müller seeks a well-tempered abstraction, working both with fuzziness and sharpness that is in short a very pragmatic implementation of photography.

Through the immediate visibility of the picture, the brightness of the display or the translation into a numeric code and the subsequent image “interpretation” by the camera, digital technology also provides a new challenge for painters by generating a new aesthetic with its bright, high contrast colours. In recent years this new aesthetic has primarily been facilitated in photography as seen in the pictures by Andreas Gursky. Digital image production leaves its traces more and more within painting. The Viennese artist Elke Krystufek, for example, paints off a computer screen. Sometimes you find a painted cursor “on canvas”. Felix Müller’s new painting style derives from such a discourse and is heightened in its vivid colours and brilliance like a monitor or a projection. Consequently the exhibition in the Kunsthalle St. Gallen is limited to only a few pictures. The number of canvases orientates itself rather towards a video display than to a painting exhibition.

Landscape painting is known for its long tradition. Making a mountaintop the dominating subject of an image also has a number of role models. Setting the viewers perspective from a bird’s-eye view goes back to the Modern era (such as Robert Delaunay’s bold depiction of the Eiffel Tower). Felix Müller’s fascination with traditional models of art history has already been mentioned. Academic categories are being employed, but in practice they are immediately dismantled or at least challenged.

An obvious reference to Müller’s Alps paintings is Gerhard Richter’s series “Mountains”, a subject that the German painter thoroughly examined in 1968/69. But only in one case does he paint a mountain as the main

⁴ Ibid., p.10.

⁵ Even within economics there have recently been more thoughts about “sustainability” rather than “acceleration”. See also Jeremy Rifkin, *The European Dream: How Europe’s Vision of the Future is Quietly Eclipsing the American Dream*, Frankfurt/New York, 2004

⁶ Regarding the interdependency between Robert Zünd and contemporary photography see: *Beseelte Landschaft – Inszenierungen, Robert Zünd und die Photographie seiner Zeit*. Istvan Balogh, Ester van der Bie – Fotografie, Christoph Merian Verlag, Basel, 2002

image subject;⁷ usually it is the depiction of cut hilltops or valleys. The selection of the detail heightens the depiction's abstraction. Richter nevertheless considers his pictures as part of the Romantic tradition. "I simply believe that we have not yet overcome Romanticism. The images of this era are still a part of our reality..."⁸ Although Felix Müller might not generally oppose this estimation, his occupation with the mountain as metaphor is ambiguous. On one hand mountains are "gigantic sculptures."⁹ On the other hand they offer an endless reservoir of stories and fables, which – as the artist states – also results in the evocative names. With names such as "Jungfrau (Virgin)", "Mönch (Monk)" or "Drei Schwestern (Three Sisters)", the mountaintops are personalised or at least placed in a narrative context.

A closer look reveals a visual interpretation that goes beyond this narrative level. The painted landscapes of Felix Müller appear like camouflage patterns, however upon a closer view, symbolic worlds open up. Deer, hare and foxes are hidden in the patch-like structure of the Swiss Alps. Whereas in the furrows, crevices, folds and cracks of the "Vallé du Silence", a high valley in the Himalayas, elephants suddenly appear – not only two or three but a whole family, depicted from the front, in profile, actually from all sides. Interestingly the elephant is a much-quoted symbol for all kinds of beliefs and superstitions, for the sensual and the supernatural (Serge Gainsbourg, for example, hallucinates about the "éléphant rose"). It is hard to believe that Müller's elephants – although painted without intention – are without meaning. What works in the great outdoors, which is to stimulate the viewer's imagination and to have the image memory go crazy, obviously works just as well as a painted picture. It lends a certain mystery to the landscapes, at times an archetypical depth, a world behind the picture. You feel caught like a test person in the famous test, developed by Hermann Rorschach where senseless blob panels are free for interpretation. In this case there are mountain images that suddenly appear before the curtain of the painted canvas, playing their confusing games with us.

Josef Felix Müller's paintings are built in layers. These can be layers of paint from overpainting, perceptive layers seen from a near or distant view, psychologizing layers (as with the hidden animals), or art historical layers as remote references. Even the pictured Alps are an ancient construct of different rock layers. Müller's painting works like a palimpsest: from the

reuse of the canvas through the further use of art historical models to the actual act of painting, which is nothing else than a never ending painting over of the subject, it is all about the development of a picture from the variety of influences, processes, and – in the real sense of the word – models. Because of their thickness Josef Felix Müller once compared his multi-layered canvases to elephant skin.¹⁰ One is tempted to think further of this comparison on a metaphorical level.

Translated by Uli Nickel, Münster

⁷ Gerhard Richter, *Mountains*, 1968, 102 cm x 92 cm, oil on canvas, Catalogue Raisonné: 179-3.

⁸ Jean-Pierre Criqui, „Drei Impromptus über die Kunst Gerhard Richters“, in: *Parkett* No. 35, 1993, p. 32

⁹ See footnote 3, p. 10.

¹⁰ See footnote 1, p. 1.