

PATRICIA SWEETOW GALLERY

77 GEARY STREET MEZZANINE SAN FRANCISCO CA 94108 415.788.5126 F 788.5207

PETER TOLLENS

By Stefan Kraus

Translated from the German by Ruth Koenig, Buren, Netherlands
From Gallery S65 catalog, Aalst, Germany, 2001

"But vain and imperfect seem to me those sciences which do not stem from experience, the source of all certainty, and which do not end in a tangible experience, i.e. which remain within the limits of the five senses." (Paraphrased from Leonardo da Vinci, *Il libro di pittura*)

October 1995

Painting (i.e. spreading paint on a surface) that does not represent anything (i.e. that refers to neither a figural or an abstract reality), can seek to attain immateriality as a coloured surface or, as is the case with Peter Tollens' paintings, can develop as coloured materiality into a concrete presence in space. In his recent work Peter Tollens has intensified the corporeity that has been characterizing his paintings more and more since the early 1980s. The crucial element - the surface of the paint-layer - has acquired a crusty, earthbound heaviness but at the same time the lightness and fragility of dust, for the seemingly tough mass of paint looks extremely dry and matt. The colour-relief emerges from layer upon layer of paint whose different characters finally interact on the fissured surface, hinting at how the painter handled the paint, how it was spread over the surface. Tollens uses only oil and egg tempera pigments and mixes them himself; their consistency, due to various additives and subtle variations in the mixture, enhances their materiality. He applies his paint to prepared rectangular wood or canvas carriers, always with a brush. The width of the brush and the length of the brush stroke depend on format and paint; they also tell us how close to his surface the painter worked. The painting is a visual record of how it was made, and time plays a part in the viewing of it. Not until he has decided on his principal colour does Tollens differentiate the chromaticism during the painting process, constantly reacting to feedback from what he has already done. He may react by completely covering the first layer of paint, sometimes by inverting the colour - witness the edges of colour on formats filled in all over with painstaking thoroughness. While the underlying layers are importantly involved in forming the relief, their effect on the surface colour varies considerably.

Those fragments which do remain visible correspond with minute scraps of colour which Tollens works into the top layer of paint at the same time as his principal colour. The tiny reserve areas of colour stand out on that final, covering layer as patches of graduated mattness, occasionally glinting with restrained highlights. Given the minimal differences in a densely packed gamut of colour, this produces an incredible sense of depth that is particularly effective in different lighting, i.e. when lit from the front or the side. Tollens eschews decorative effects such as maximum contrast; he wishes to prevent the colour from monopolizing the beholder's attention. The painting process is not a preconceived development towards the topmost layer; together, the layers are meant to produce a continuum which the beholder can extend in the act of seeing. The mutual dependency of paint, brush width, length of brush stroke and picture format is just as decisive for this act of perception as the format's relationship to the beholder is. The sparse insertions of colour expand the original impression of a principal colour into a perception of a chromatic tension which is ambiguous, but which because of its remarkable individuality generates concrete, material associations which only achieve the utmost precision in one situation for each beholder. The first experience is that different lighting causes a fundamental change of chromaticism. Due to the surface's pronounced relief character and its shifting shadows, this first experience may be forgotten. The picture regains its non-referential autonomy and perhaps, in another situation, gives and same beholder a different experience. In this act of memory the corporeity of the works attains a realism surpassing the possibilities of representational painting.

Contrary to any kind of conceptualism, Peter Tollens adopts an almost romantic position in his intuitive handling of paint, thereby rendering plausible the ostensible contradictions in the act of painting - such as reverting to a colour from one of the underlying layers of paint. Tollens is not primarily concerned with an ontological approach to painting, colour and its perception, which might merely be prompted by an object resulting from a dogmatically employed artist concept. The material presence of his works shows painting to be more a process of craftsmanship, producing an object which faces us as something unmistakable, personal. This does not mean that Tollens' art should be seen as "radical" - if there were any justification whatsoever for such a label - since it frankly does not seek to formulate as its goal any other artistic concept in the tradition of the modern. The painting acquires a pre-modern, almost semantic function in the act of seeing. It may be that this tradition in painting as revealed by Tollens, starting with the selection and handling of his materials, that this aura of a work of art's originality, is an anachronism inasmuch as the possible effect of these works evokes structures of memory in the beholder which are as earthbound as the works themselves. As objects of haptic experience they represent a reality which, in the virtual era, is in increasing danger of becoming lost to our sensory faculties. Our perception is still influenced by the awareness of the loss of this reality and of possible memories aroused by the works. But what if these works, by virtue of their material presence, were able not only to recall fundamental material experiences but could also enable reality to be experienced in them? That is exactly the question from which the necessity arises for a fundamental realization, in every generation, of painting's sensory and hence meaningful potential. "New", in view of this necessity, is not an adequate criterion; awareness of means, their described interaction and contemporary relevance would be better.

December 1998

Instead of writing about these paintings again, I might just as well write about a loaf of bread. I could try to describe it, its shape, colour and surface, its density, how it smells and tastes. Descriptions of colour painting tend to follow that pattern, and are much of a muchness. I am tired of reading about these cumbersome visual aids and tedious production analyses (... I don't have to know how bread was baked in order to taste it). Every in-crowd cultivates its own idiom and its own behaviour which - like discussions about art - are accepted as methods. These descriptions usually convey only a connection with art, notably with painting; sophistic attempts at differentiation serve to distinguish one concept from others. In the case of Peter Tollens, though, comparison with sculpture or photography or something completely different - jazz, for instance - would probably be more illuminating. For the rest, any attempt to describe presupposes a distance which I cannot have when I look at these paintings, nor when I eat bread. They were not made for distance. On the contrary, one desires to come close to them. Distance would also be tantamount to doubting them. Why should I do that, when I sense the necessity for them? Towards what science should I adopt a stance that is not my own? As if the artificiality of a situation were a proper premise for conveying the self-evidence of art (... in order to experience bread I have to eat it). Seeing is the actual process: from which experience is the picture given colour, and what experience will it give me? These paintings are absolutely concrete. They mean what they are and are what they mean. By that token they are independent of their own origins (... I don't need to know the baker, nor the field where the wheat grew). As autonomous objects they are not part of the wall on which they hang. But as objects of perception they are not autonomous, for they depend on my experience, which places them in a context and gives them a story. In the way they are "made" I see the traditional craftsmanship of an easel painting, in spite of the fact that I experience them as independent objects in space. Their somewhat upright formats in various sizes remind me of portraits, which I also have to approach closely in order to discern any individuality. However, we are dealing here with something that is not only represented, or shown as a picture, but as such possesses immediacy. That is why the encounter with Peter Tollens' paintings is always a voluptuous relating to something else. They satisfy an archaic need for the closeness of another body, they require microscopic scrutiny. Regardless of whether they radiate warmth or coldness, of whether we turn towards them or away from them, their enduring presence assures us of the basis of human existence, which is individual, space bound and sensual. Because of this nearness and depth, these are strangely slow images.