

Melanie Ohnemus about Katherina Olschbaur's paintings, 2016

Katherina Olschbaur's paintings operate along the margin between representational and abstract painting. Many of her works show objects reminiscent of vessels, extremities, or amorphous shapes. Their forms usually derive from real objects from the artist's immediate environment, things she collected, personal effects, or the chance products of her work in the studio. Some of them are parts of entire sceneries, museum-like setups, or elements of ancient sculptures. Others are mere detritus or crumpled-up pieces of paper. Yet others – though these are fairly rare – are entire interiors or other concrete objects such as an umbrella. How these forms come into being, or what leads the artist to select them rather than others, remains unclear. It must be an interest on her part in the remembered form that makes them special. A form to which the mind seems bound to return.

The fragmentary nature of memory and the reflection on why some recollections are more salient than others are part Olschbaur's work on her art. Sometimes she uses drawings and photographs of such forms as models. Some forms are used time and again and examined in different ways. She often works on several pieces at the same time, sometimes letting elements filter from one picture into another. So these forms are not static; they are painted in rotated, condensed, transparent, positive and negative versions. They may take up the center or appear near the edge. Tilting the view is important. It lets the artist create a painterly reflection of thinking and remembering as processes that are in perpetual motion. Sometimes the forms appear closer; sometimes they are a little further away. Sometimes they are allotted a great deal of room; sometimes they are crowded together. To examine them is to experience something like thinking itself.

The forms are sometimes executed in great detail, with almost sculptural definition, while at other times they fuse with the space or are in two spaces at once. Space results from acts of gestural painting; paint is poured and then reworked, there are transparencies, streaks, outlines. Occasionally the forms float in space, whereas others are firmly moored. A certain balance between condensation and transparence brings a space into being. Yet the artist rarely chooses the path of abstraction pure and simple – it is more important to her to let amply conceived spaces unfold. That is why a picture she is working on may at times be poised in a state in which it is not entirely clear which side the picture is currently on. Olschbaur works in oil paint, now and

then complemented by dispersion paint and pigments. She methodically approaches things from different sides. Things are covered up and then uncovered again. Moments of uncertainty and bafflement occur. Things overlap, suggesting recognizable objects, the motif of a column turns into something like an arm but is rendered abstract to a degree that, as an object, it is already worn thin. Canvases are slashed, openings emerge. Pictures are taken off their stretcher frames and hung – naked, as it were – on the wall. Sometimes elements from the studio serve as support media. Painting extends its bounds. Things culminate or huddle closely together, while others have a wide and serene surface to themselves.

This is about working on things one does not quite understand yet: painting as a way to make room for something one remembers and the memory itself. It is a little like when you hold something in front of you and examine it closely. Something changes. When you look at it again, something else has changed. Maybe it is only the incidence of light, or the fact that you see it from a different perspective. Olschbaur's painting always retains spatial depth, showing things in interaction, the tensions between them lending them an aura of significance and making their often banal origins in everyday life immaterial. She works with bewildering uncertainties, facing up to them in her art, but without resolving them; they remain a tangible theme in the very form of her painting. Perhaps, then, this is also about resisting the temptation to do something about objects that lack definition. Learning to accept vagueness can be as interesting to the artist herself as it is to the beholder.

By honing the focus of her works, Olschbaur manages to give something that is in itself quite subjective pointed reality and in so doing cools it down until it hardens. A form initially selected by intuition is subject to painterly analysis until she achieves complete mental distance from it. She leaves things in this ambivalent state, allowing an intimate closeness to persist and yet forcing an impersonal perspective. The mirror in which the real appears, she believes, ought to remain recognizable as such. That is how the picture attains a measure of autonomy.

With her very individual approach and her zest for analytical exploration, Katherina Olschbaur has staked out a distinctive position in painting. She is not afraid of experimentation and the displacements within her work it may occasion; on the contrary, she harnesses its creative potential, pursuing her vision with an unswerving sense of purpose and great courage.

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