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Invar-Torre Hollaus

The Content of Eberhard Havekost's Painting

Eberhard Havekost takes his inspiration for the subjects of his paintings from very different media: newspapers as well as science and entertainment magazines can serve as models, as can images from advertisements, television, films, and the Internet. Sometimes he uses his own photographs, in which he captures impressions from his immediate, everyday environment. These pictures often show banal and unspectacular things—things that we might not otherwise notice. He does not content himself with the stylistic devices often used in photorealistic painting, such as hyperrealism or blurred effects, which merely imitate the technically sterile, bodiless surface effect and the somewhat cool and distanced aesthetic of digital photographs through painting in the manner of *trompe l'oeil*. Before Havekost uses these sources as models for his paintings, he digitally alters them. He intervenes in the subject of the picture, or only in details of it, as well as the coloration or contrasts of light and dark, to render it unfamiliar. These manipulations create a more abstract representation of the original pictures and transfer them into a new, artificial picture before the 'reality' captured in the original is made abstract and unfamiliar by transferring the photographic picture into a painted picture. This distancing and distortion also relativizes the importance of what is depicted, which the picture would convey if it were more clearly recognizable. Thus, when Eberhard Havekost begins painting, the original subject of the picture is often no longer clearly visible—especially in his more recent works.

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Havekost persistently adheres to painting in order to search for an adequate, critical response to the flood of digitally produced and reproduced images using this traditional medium, and thus reflects on the function of the picture in our media-saturated culture of consumption. After all, painting offers alternative forms of perceiving the world which digital images cannot. And yet, for many people—often without a nuanced engagement with or questioning of this phenomenon—it is these very digital images that, through the daily use and consumption of various informational media and social media platforms, have become influential and crucial to our understanding of the reality and truth of the world.

We see ourselves confronted with a paradoxical situation: If we are to use the various media and technologies for producing and reproducing images, we must interpret an enormous number of different objects and materials that can only be perceived via the smooth surface of a digital screen. Despite the abundance of physical bodies as subjects in the media, it is these very digital images that create a desubjectified, bodiless world. Haptic and sensory experiences are not possible with such a consuming approach to pictures—that is, the experiences we have with such

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pictures lead to distorted conclusions about the actual substance of what is perceived.

(Digital) photography in particular has a surface quality that renders objects abstract and distances them from their original qualities. Surfaces made of metal, for instance, seem soft, while clouds appear hard. This distortion of material reality or of our knowledge and haptic and sensory experience of objects through the media creates new relationships to reality with which the viewer can engage. Digital photography proves to be a subtractive medium in which information is deleted, in a sense, through the technical production process. Painting, by contrast, is an additive medium. With every stroke of the paintbrush and every layer of paint that is applied to the previous ones, more information is continually deposited on the picture, which is further distilled and intensified through reflection and the constant checking and questioning of the picture.

In Havekost's process, the focus of perception shifts to different specific details than in the original pictures. The picture is thus not only released from its original media context as it is transferred to the medium of painting, but is given a new meaning and weight in the context of art. Only this transformation into an artwork and the critical questioning by the artist make the modalities of perception and our conventions of 'reality' evident to the viewer, as well as the subversive power that can be inherent in pictures. The changes in the content of the picture that the original interpretation of the picture undergoes in the process of abstraction as it is transferred to painting demonstrate to the viewer the degree to which our perception—and thus also our social, ethical, political, and cultural attitudes—depends on pictures and how it can be manipulated by them. With his method of painting, Havekost offers the possibility of thinking critically about central aspects of perception. The fact that he seems to choose the subjects of his pictures without a recognizable empathetic interest or an emotional connection and to paint them quite soberly and objectively makes it easier for the viewer to question and engage in a critical and nuanced manner with the pictures that surround us in our daily lives.

If the viewer accepts the artist's offer, he or she will experience the engagement with these pictures as an emancipation, since he or she becomes aware of his or her own way of seeing the world and how this subjective seeing relates to other perspectives and opinions. In this way, a critical and nuanced discourse can be cultivated that leaves no room for polemics, ignorance, or populism.

Visual Scanning and Understanding of Surfaces

The breadth of heterogeneous subjects and the various ways they are depicted in painting create an ambivalent impression in Havekost's work. In his figurative paintings—in this context the artist speaks of 'reproductive'

pictures—this effect is created mainly by the smooth, seemingly anonymous surface, on which no significant gesture of the paintbrush is visible. The objects he depicts are also shown from unusual perspectives, such as a disorienting close-up view that optically distorts the object, or an entirely different focus on the subject is shown—as in works such as Zucker, B13 (p. 51) and Wesen, B15 (p. 80)—which makes it difficult to quickly identify and precisely categorize what is seen. The degree of abstraction triggered by this kind of depiction loads the object with a new reality that is separate from its original materiality and context. The result is a markedly slower perception and processing of visually and intellectually recorded data. Ocean, B12 (p. 73) from 2012 is a fitting example that demonstrates the consequences of this new reality with which the artist activates the original picture by shifting perspective. This painting is based on a picture from an advertising campaign by an international clothing chain in which a model in a bikini is shown lying on a beach. The detail view that Havekost chose not only exaggerates the suggestive power of advertising but brings things into focus which many viewers might not have noticed in an overall view of the advertisement. The new bikini model recedes to the background, and instead the almost surreal coloration and disparate effect of the various surfaces of the sky, ocean, and suntanned skin are emphasized. Painting gives the immaterial, antiseptic surface effect of photography a resistant quality that almost hurts the eye. This is evident, for instance, in the coarseness of the grains of sand and the hard contrasts of the reflections of the water on the woman's inclined thigh, which appear more like wounds on the deeply tanned skin. Painting gives the various substances their own physical presence and visual tangibility that is not concretely apparent in this way in the photograph.

Along with these kinds of works, the artist also regularly creates stand-alone paintings and multipart series—such as Gefühl, B15 (p. 75) and Licht, B13 (pp. 68/69)—in which the original subject is either just vaguely recognizable and can be reconstructed in the viewer's imagination or appears to be painted over and is obscured by numerous subtly overlapping, thinly applied layers of paint. The viewer gazes at this diffuse veil of paint in cold and warm tones that appear to float immaterially rather than suggest a sense of depth. Especially in his multipart series, Havekost portrays a certain subject multiple times in sequence in order to be able to more clearly analyze the changing pictorial structures and modalities of perception in which we as viewers think. He visually scans the surface of the canvas in order to understand the qualities and effect of the portrayed object in and through the painting process.

Conventions of pictorial hierarchies and narrative are upended in this seemingly arbitrary and disparate juxtaposition, as are the viewer's expectations, and instead the imagination and associative perception are activated. The carefully chosen titles have a kind of trigger function that enriches the subject with additional content. The 2015 work Baum, B15 (pp. 70/71) is not only linked to earlier works, which—although they show

a different subject—have the same title; the title (which means ‘tree’) serves as a kind of conceptual extension of the subject. The branching cracks of the shattered smartphone screen not only recall the branches of a tree; the title figuratively, associatively points to the importance of digital devices in our society, which for many users have come to replace conventional print media such as books, reference works, or anthologies as apparently more trustworthy and easily accessible, but also fragile sources of knowledge (digital databases such as Wikipedia and Google as the new ‘tree of knowledge’) that are susceptible to damage.

The separation from narrative conventions, or the loading with a new content that is separate from the object, is apparent especially in three-part series such as *Materie 1, B12/13* (pp. 22/23) and *Theorie Geometrie, B15* (p. 37), in which no obvious narrative connections can be found. These works have nothing in common with the rhetorical pictorial structure of a traditional triptych. Recognizable objects or codes are combined with abstract, intensely colored, thickly applied, unmixed, pure painting. These works emphasize sensory surface qualities typical of oil paint and the suggestive impression of depth of the variously used, saturated tones. Without exhausting, expansive gestures—these paintings are relatively small—the entire energy and presence of the respective color is made visible. Furthermore, in some of these works, not the entire surface of the canvas is covered in paint. There are blank areas in which the white or gray of the ground is visible as a color value, which structure the composition and increase the effect of the other tones.

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These abstract works in particular, in which the composition in thickly applied, sometimes unmixed paints in forceful strokes is built up and condensed, may be the most surprising to the viewer, even disorienting. In works such as *Sommer, B15* (p. 63) and *Lichtung, B15* (p. 58) the titles may inspire the associative perception of the viewer and help him or her to attribute what is portrayed to a kind of figuration or real-world references through memories of landscapes or experiences in nature. In works such as *Endless, B10/11* (pp. 54/55) such an interpretation is less applicable, and the relative nature of the meaning that we attribute to the objects and images that surround us becomes obvious.

Here the entire complexity of Eberhard Havekost’s artistic approach and his critical questioning of pictures and media become apparent. The degree of complexity with which he compares various types of images and uses them in his work as well as his wide-ranging art-historical knowledge of pictures are apparent in recent works such as *Schöner Wohnen, B12* (p. 78), *Copy + Property, B12* (pp. 46/47), and *Copy 2, B13* (pp. 20/21), which are inspired by Gerhard Richter’s color charts or Ellsworth Kelly’s non-gesturally painted early works, and in works such as *Bikini A, B14* (p. 72), *Stein, B14* (pp. 52/53), and *Flatscreen X, B14* (p. 24), which allude to Mark Rothko’s color field painting, and whose titles and colors suggest entirely different, tangible associations. Havekost’s associative imagery

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thus addresses the viewer’s rational as well as sensory and empathetic perception. He thus not only shows the almost inexhaustible expressive possibilities of painting compared to the limitations of language, but also our dependence on linguistic categorizations, which are often uncritically followed. A specific topic or genre is not a crucial part of Havekost’s choice of subject. He frees the portrayed subjects from such conventions and the related expectations of the viewer. He is interested in the modalities and conventions according to which we perceive reality and how what is shown in a picture—or on the surface of an object—can be identified as a reliable, generally valid reality as well as the components that are ultimately used to materialize reality in a picture.

How Should We See Reality?

One might ask what the traditional medium of painting is good for in our technically advanced age. When an artist such as Havekost reacts critically to the new media through painting, he can make processes and modalities of perception visible and question them in a way that the new media are not capable of doing. And perhaps especially in this age of abundant digital reproductions of pictures, painting can offer more innovative and sustainable alternative spaces of understanding and possibility in regard to the complexity of the things of our world. Above all, such individual approaches to painting show the viewer an autonomous position amid the anonymous arbitrariness and exchangeability of digital images from which he or she can perceive and place him- or herself as a subject.

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Ultimately Havekost’s work also deals with questioning the two poles of figuration and abstraction which necessarily result from the uncertainty of visual data or the act of perception. We are constantly searching for reliable points of reference for what we see. The consequences of this phenomenon are far greater for artists. After all, in the process of painting, the object constantly changes as long as the artist questions it with his or her gaze. In the sense of the title Havekost chose for one of his works, *Benutzeroberfläche* (User Interface), this means: How do we visually scan the surface of the perceived object, and what is activated in us in this process? His pictures are thus also about a fundamental visual understanding of structures and connections and therefore how our analytical and critical seeing and contemplative, empathetic looking correspond with the exterior and interior world and how both of these help us understand the world. In the (relatively) limited space that the technical and painterly possibilities and the spatially limited canvas offer Havekost, he is subject to an almost limitless freedom of thought in his reflection on the complexity of what is perceived, and he can translate this complexity brushstroke by brushstroke, picture by picture into a new reality that is equal to the likewise real-life original source.

Eberhard Havekost is not interested in painterly simulation or illusions of familiar, real objects as the subjects of his works. Instead, he asks how permeable the various media are in relation to their counterparts. Where do content and meaning continue to exist, and where and due to what factors are they deformed and changed into something different and new?

The apparently unrelated subjects and the heterogeneity of the painting style in Havekost's work demonstrate the various kinds of images in the media which surround us and shape our idea of reality. In this way, he deals with the complex intermingling of various media and points to contradictions and gaps that contrast with the (usually) beautiful appearance of these images. What does reality mean when it is mainly perceived through the media and thus in an artificially produced, staged, and pre-digested form? Do we only understand reality when we take more than just the human perspective into account—that is, when we are also aware of the perspective of the media? In any case, there are different ways of seeing the world: The human—rational and intellectual as well as sensory and empathetic—perspective as opposed to the perhaps irrational but material nature, and the abstract, reduced perspective of the media. Reality and thus a better understanding of the connections in our world can likely only be conceived and understood when we are aware of all of these levels.

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Invar-Torre Hollaus (born in 1973), holds a doctorate in art history and works as a curator and writer. He lives in Basel, where he teaches the history, theory, and comparative study of images at the Academy of Art and Design. He has authored numerous publications, most recently an extensive monograph on Frank Auerbach released by Piet Meyer Verlag.

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