

The Linear and Painterly Chimera of Martina Fischer

The Chimera series of Martina Fischer consists of two suites, one of which depicts partially identifiable insects entangled within murky, unfathomable baroque spaces, wherein sharp contours and rectilinear lines coexist with modeled, painterly, recessive and translucent sectors. In these hallucinatory images, figure and space are interwoven through abstract forms. When a gleam of light bursts out of a given sector, these paintings of Fischer recall Dutch still lifes with insects, only now illusion and abstraction are both fractured, rendering one as the alter ego of the other.

The other suite is nonrepresentational in that no specific referents are present, although pictorial illusion is at its height through dramatic contrasts of light and shadow upon illuminated spherical and filamentous forms. Apart from the elision of insects, this group adheres to an equivalent pictorial syntax, where an image emblemizes a phantasmagoria of illusion paradoxically intertwined with linear and painterly abstraction. At times ligaments emerge and swirl around a bulbous mass, while at other times organic forms are rendered as flattened fossils pressed upon their picture planes. The central spherical forms of Fischer may trigger recollections of *The Soap Bubble* (c. 1733) of Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin, *The Monumental Shadow* (1932) of René Magritte or *Hope for News* (1996) of Ross Bleckner.

As Fischer's rendition of representational and abstract figures acutely couples the linear with the painterly, it prompts the formalist taxonomy of the Swiss art historian Heinrich Wölfflin, whose set of binary oppositions in his prominent 1915 book, *Principles of Art History*, laid out the fundamental differences between Renaissance and Baroque art. The comparative system of Wölfflin set the Renaissance apart from the Baroque through five pairs of binary opposites: linear/painterly, planar/recessive, closed/open, multiple/unitary, absolute/relative clearness. Linear style, Wölfflin writes, gives "the spectator a feeling of security, as if he could move along them with his fingers, and all the modeling shadows follow the form so completely that the sense of touch is actually challenged." As opposed to this, a painterly representation "has its roots only in the eye and appeals only to the eye, and just as the child ceases to take hold of things in order to 'grasp' them, so mankind has ceased to test the picture for its tactile values."¹

The paintings of Fischer disorganize this comparative system of Wölfflin, stipulating a tertiary, incongruous, chimerical trope. While clear and sharp contours and outlines generate the compositions of *Baum* and *Spiegel*, both figures and grounds in these paintings dispense clear visibility through transparencies of paint layers and saturated colors. And just as the planar and recessive coexist in *Morpho I* and *Morpho II*, the pictures

¹ Heinrich Wölfflin, *Principles of Art History: The Problem of the Development of Style in Later Art*, trans. M. D. Hottinger (New York: Dover Publications, 1950), p. 21.

are self-contained and point back to themselves as much as they point out beyond themselves and purposefully look limitless. Likewise, *Kleine Chimären* overturns the binary opposition of multiplicity and unity. *Animal, Netz, Kleine Nacht 1* and *Kleine Nacht 2* absorb us into Wölfflin's treatise of absolute and relative clearness. If the spheroid of *Kleine Nacht 1* conjures up *The Soap Bubble* of Chardin, it also brings to mind Michael Fried's speculation:

... perhaps it is that Chardin found in the absorption of his figures both a natural correlative for his own engrossment in the act of painting and a proleptic mirroring of what he trusted would be the absorption of the beholder before the finished work.²

Hence the chimera, the fire-breathing monster with the head of a lion, body of a goat and a tail of a serpent, has become in Fischer's universe the allegory of a formal grammar that is palpable and illusory at once, as much as it is figurative and abstract at once. Having entwined the schematic modeling of Magritte's giant sphere and the painterly approach of Bleckner, Fischer's dichotomy of linear and painterly modes swings Wölfflin's doors open, only to disorganize and deconstruct the opposite parameters.

The see-through and opaque figures and grounds of Fischer thus hybridize rigorous design and downright gestural, giving her output a distinct pictorial and discursive voice, one that elicits the classical and the baroque, one that draws out so many instances of the modern and postmodern, yet persists to escape from all through its singular tactics.

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² Michael Fried, *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1988), p. 51.