Perception as Interpretation

Notes on the art of Gabriele Schäfer

By Gerhard Charles Rump

Images of nature, like landscapes and animals, are, also for contemporary artists, a constant artistic challenge voluntarily – and gladly – taken on. And for a good reason. We all are part of nature, despite all the nurture we provide, it is the very basis of our existence. This is, really, nothing but the truth. Even the equations of physics reflect that. Gabriele Schäfer shows a deliberate and fully conscious commitment to nature in her art. Practically all her paintings show a motif from nature: seascapes, dunes, coastlines, skies, mountains, birds, and plants. She aptly navigates between the Scylla and Charybdis of artistic tradition, the heroic and the beautiful, like in the works of Allaert van Everdingen and Salvator Rosa on the heroic side, and Claude Lorrain on the other, the beautiful side. And she embraces the Modern Tradition, originating in the 19th Century, when subjects like clouds in the sky, like those by Alexander Cozens, first became acceptable as an autonomous motif, having held a supporting role only in times before.

Nature fascinates Gabriele Schäfer for its character, its soul. So she is less interested in a meticulous rendering of details, something critics have, quite wrongly, accused the Pre-Raphaelites for, rather she tries to capture the very essence of nature in usually brightly coloured images to achieve a clear aesthetic statement, often giving a generalized and individual impression of a pars-pro-toto view at the same time. This commitment goes as far as using natural materials, like different types of sand, natural pigments and chalks in her works. This may also speak of the material qualities of colour, but only very gently – it

is more of a kind of magical incantation of nature by using real things, not only representing them.

Painting landscapes means that the artist will conceptually have to be content with a section of the whole at any time, maybe with the exception of creating panoramic views. Traditionally, Flemish landscapes tried to act counter to that by giving a kind of overview over a landscape, with a high horizon. Dutch landscape painting, on the other and, usually shows a more natural perspective with a low horizon, fully embracing the fragmentariness of the visual impression. (1)

In Gabriele Schäfer's landscapes, be they seascapes, coastal views or shore scenes, the height of the horizon varies, meaning that the artist adjusts her perspective according to subject matter, never subjecting her interpretation to a general, ruling principle of representation. Perception becomes interpretation. Sometimes her views appear to be slightly photographic, at other times more of a bird's-eye view or, especially in the mountain images, an in-flight aerial view from the cockpit of a helicopter. This must be seen as a happy blending of traditional pictorial values with a decidedly contemporary vision, grounding her art in the collective history of aesthetic experience whilst maintaining a pronounced contemporary attitude, an attitude that is turned into form, into art.

The rainforest images and the renderings of reflections share a number of common traits, both in colour and form, visually playing with mass and transparency, real and pictorial space and the essential flatness of an image, rephrasing phenomena of colour and light in

space as colour-field interplay on a surface, serving as an intriguing offer of a perceptual process. The complexity of the structural make-up, singularities and serial phenomena, repetitions and aesthetic relations, keep the eye of the beholder busy, sometimes accelerating his visual endeavours, sometimes slowing them down, permanently creating and re-creating optical interpretation through increasingly interacting layers providing an almost autonomous aesthetic experience, finally ending in a understanding of the figurative undergrowth, triggering a repeated altercation with the visual. The potentially endless possibilities of perceptual repetition are, at the same time, the basis of the potential assays at interpretation.

Perception and interpretation in Gabriele Schäfer's art are both firmly resting on her exquisite sense of colour. She has developed a colourism that creates its visual impact mostly by making use of kindred colours. So she establishes a spectrum of tints and shades which ensures discernibility and individuality while empowering her to conjure up the extension and richness in impression typical for her paintings. Sometimes she deploys a strong but never garish contrast, choosing that kind of contrast from the possible varieties which will best support her purpose, underline the visual effect, and not claim optical autonomy.

Animals have been around in art since the earliest of times. The existentially close connection we have to them in a very wide variety of relations is a very widespread and very noble traditional genre, from Early Egyptian Art and great artists like George Stubbs to contemporary masters like Martin Eder. Gabriele Schäfer's favourite subjects are birds. Yes, we do find the little dinosaurs fascinating. The have never failed to fire our

imagination, partly by her freedom to lift off and fly away, enjoying a command of space we, as humans, lack. And we find them anytime, anywhere, starting from "*Behold the fowls of the air: for they sow not, neither do they reap, nor gather into barns*" (Matthew 6:26) to "Brasilian Love Bird" (a. o. by Nat "King" Cole, 1962) and "Free as a Bird" (John Lennon, 1977/1995). Also many visual artists have strived to create images with this motif, like The Master of the Mews, Hieronymus Bosch, René Magritte, Sue Hayward, Sultan Adler, Gabriel Halevi, and, of course, Gabriele Schäfer herself.

In her images of birds they mostly occupy the pictorial centre, sometimes more pronounced, sometimes with more free space around them, without giving up their importance as the main subject. The setting is always atmospheric, artistic, aesthetic – and, despite a good shot of realism, never a bland zoological illustration. These images are also experiments in form, like the grey heron, whose dynamic shape contrasts against the horizontal swooshes on the ground and the vertical ones in the background. These strong formal elements create the pictorial setting, which possesses a distinct character of its own by explicitly not aiming at creating the illusion of a natural habitat. It is about painting as much as it is about nature.

This is especially important in the renderings of butterflies – their intriguing static wing patterns are turned into impressions of colours painted dynamically and full of movement. It would be highly inappropriate to try taxonomy with these images, a contradiction to their intention. As Gabriele Schäfer is, as an artist, less interested in physical correctness, rather more in creating a convincing image reflecting on our relation to the subject.

This we also find in her paintings of plants, like flowers and trees. Again she hardily takes on the struggle with an overwhelmingly rich and varied tradition, only to mark her very own position. In her sunflowers she distances herself very far from Vincent van Gogh in that she arranges single specimens and groups of black and dried plants, monumentalizing them by a view "sotto in sù", from below. This characterizes a certain aesthetics of decay as a subtle vision of the last days. The trees remind us of the etchings of Rembrandt: The are perfectly optical in nature, and cannot be "completed" – their sketchiness is their state of perfection. Thus we are reminded that transitoriness is at the core of everything, also at the core of nature.

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Note

(1) Best compare, in London's National Gallery, Sir Peter Paul Rubens' "Landscape with Steen Castle" (1637) and "Avenue at Middelharnis" by Meindert Hobbema (1689)

Tanslated by John McNaughten