

Color as Paint Material

Fundamental to all works by Christiane Gruber are the skins she builds up from acrylic paint. These supple shapes in various sizes, which she produces in constellations of color and form, consist entirely of paint, which is to say, of binding agents and pigments. There is no supporting or stabilizing material – such as canvas, paper, or gauze, – hidden there in or beneath the paint. The paint bears its own weight. What is visible as paint is very simply nothing other than paint. Paint that is always tangible and factual. Christiane Gruber operates with these skins in order to develop her works. They are at once the material and of a material nature. And they are colorful. Both of these aspects characterize the works; Paint as a material and material as color are immediately visible and essential to them. They expose paint as a material fact. Color is their object, materiality is their theme. In this, they make use of the painted picture (as a construction, convention, association) without being pictures themselves. They play upon the painted picture as being one possibility. The picture has a presence as a form, becomes activated as a source of friction, and yet what is there to be seen is not a picture.

For her work, Christiane Gruber has developed a technique, which makes it possible for her to deal with the pure paint material, to bring it into a lasting, controlled form, without resorting to any traditional practice of painting. Coming from the linocut, where it is customary to roll on the paint and then roll it out onto the plate prior to the actual printing, she has isolated this procedure and expanded upon it: She distributes acrylic paint on plastic foil lying on the floor, and then covers this with another sheet of plastic foil. Using a roller, the paint is rolled out to a thin, cohesive layer between the sheets of foil. The upper sheet of foil is removed and the film of paint is left to dry. The process is repeated until gradually a paint skin comes about. This phase of the building up process, which may take many months for the large works, serves to provide a material basis. For this purpose, the artist makes use of diverse colors, without determining any certain coloristic direction for the piece. Only at the point when she begins to pursue a concrete idea for the work does she purposely develop the coloration by further treating the – thus far multi-colored – skin with one or several colors. The underlying layers may, for the most part, disappear, but they might also be preserved in parts, contributing to the color design of the skins.

It is also a part of Christiane Gruber's practice to re-use and reprocess smaller pieces or shreds of color skin that come about while she works, i.e. to use things she has first cast out, the leftovers. Even larger pieces may be integrated into a work she is making, and sometimes they remain visible as additions. What was once a work, or part of a work, may be incorporated into a new work, might disappear in it, without becoming lost. In this way, all material is allowed to remain material in the sense of the work. As far as possible nothing should become lost or given up. Everything has potential.

Another aspect of this working method is the sensitivity of the material, of which the artist is well aware, with which she reckons, and which she accepts. Over time, peeling and changes in the shape result that may hardly be prevented because of processes inherent to the material. Even when handled with utmost care, it is rare that works remain as they were at the time they originated. Merely because of their own great

weights, changes in the works are possible and likely – including stretching and tears in the large, hanging installations. In the event that these metamorphoses that sometimes destroy parts of the piece come about on their own and have not been caused by haphazard, willful interventions, they may be accepted as a possible condition of the work, in keeping with the intentions of the artist.

A central aspect of Christiane Gruber's work with acrylic paint is to explore the possibilities of this material. By concentrating on the sheer paint and the practice of rolling it out to skins, she gleans from this paint material an enormous, unpredictable multitude of conditions, phenomena, idiosyncrasies, and qualities, which are in part only visible from close up, and not to be seen in reproductions. Remarkable is the light-catching, sometimes almost oily sheen of the one side and a certain sober mattness of the other side of the skin, which enables the one and very same color hue to have different effects. It may also be seen how this material, compact and distinctly fabric-like, can become brittle and almost resemble bark streaked with scores and furrows. Above all, around the edges of the larger skins, precisely this paint material may be shaped in a manner so fragile that it seems virtually transparent, and as if decaying. In general, however, the material is pliant, tending towards folds, curves or rounded bulges, falling softly, above all wherever it hangs freely, which is the case with the large installations. The term skin applies beyond the obvious association, and points additionally to the tactile attraction of these surfaces only meant for the eyes, though they are only very rarely smooth. Humps, squashes, irregularities to the point of fine cracks and holes reveal them to be gradually worked up, process-driven, surfaces, beneath which other things are present and effective.

This paint is not only material, it is also color. There are no dogmas, no preferences in the choice of colors used; at most it is a matter of curiosity, a certain intermittent interest in the context of a series of works, a necessity in a spatial situation. The concentration upon a single, limited area of colors (in the installations) is just as possible as the occurrence of an immense coloristic diversity. Even within a single work, there may be neon-colored, markedly glowing minutest details, clear colors, pastel-like subdued colors and strange mixtures and interim hues (now and then, only in minimal dosages) placed alongside one another. Color may mix visibly, via smears, flowing transitions, or as a transparent superimposition. As an isolated, distinctive event, it can be embedded in a discreet, monochrome environment or it may reveal itself in fragmented scatterings of dots or spots. Or else it appears as a complex multitude of richly contrasting differences, which is virtually impossible to grasp so that the gaze does not reach completion.

For centuries, the canvas and stretcher have been essential components of the painted picture: The stretcher, which remains invisible, shapes and holds the canvas attached to it with nails or staples, stretching the fabric that in turn bears the paint. Christiane Gruber works repeatedly with these components. In doing so, however, she deconstructs the traditional constellation. Since 2012, the artist has been working with primed canvases that have already been fastened to stretchers and are ready to be painted, such as those found in art supply stores. The fabric is removed from its stretcher frame, and both components are used independently of the state in which she

has found them. The wooden stretcher is covered on all sides with a skin of paint that juts out and overhangs in parts, though the stretcher remains visible here and there and may be recognized as such, functioning as a significant component of the work since it indicates both picture and painting. A group of smaller works created in 2015 carries this procedure further. Miniature stretcher frames are hidden inside these exceptionally sculptural objects, which jut into the room from where they are fixed on the wall. These stretchers are only detectible when viewed from an extremely high angle. They provide these three-dimensional, exceptionally painterly pieces of paint skins with the stability they need. At the same time they are proof of Gruber's stringent logic with respect to the material and an ironic reminiscence of the painting. Christiane Gruber uses the canvases she has removed separately from the works with the stretchers. Due to the way they were produced, their forms are non-uniform, hardly redolent of the rectangular shape of a picture. Only one of the two sides is worked on directly: In addition to the application of the paint skin that overlaps in places, the artist also paints with a brush here, whereby the paint may seep through the nail holes or collect at the edges of the canvas, and other leftover remains might be included. This matters in as much as both sides of the work are meant for viewing, requiring each to prove itself as a worthy, harmoniously visual constellation. Since each of these works has its two sides, the decision for a temporary or permanent viewing side may depend on the presentation context, although this may also be subjectively determined (by the owner).

In the works with stretchers and canvases, the rectangle as the traditional place for a picture, and for painting even more so, is still present, at least as a reference and as a material possibility. By contrast, two other groups of works the artist has been creating since 2015 dispense with this reference altogether. Both have in common that they accentuate on the wall the irregularly contoured forms of the paint skins with their bulges, nibs, and lappings without any modifications or visible supplementation.

A series of smaller works reveal themselves initially as flat objects, which all have in common a predominantly white, or respectively light-pastel, coloration. Tiny traces of paint scattered as if randomly, or elsewhere as extensive, decidedly painterly color mixtures, give these works their character. The material nature of these pieces is striking. The surface of the rolled paint seems almost like a relief that features physical-seeming structures and furrows. Despite the light coloration's tendency towards being immaterial – precisely this strikingly haptic charm of the material contributes substantially to the corporeality and the material nature of these works. Although in the case of these works, the visible softness of the paint skins has been considerably reduced by backing them with a cardboard construction in order to stabilize the surface flatness and they seem to float at a short distance before the wall, nevertheless, they reveal in this purportedly painting-like manner of presentation the qualities of form inventions, painterly potential, and not lastly, the object-like factuality of the paint material explorations that Christiane Gruber undertakes.

Related to these pieces is a second group of works consisting of paint skins individually attached to the wall. These comparatively large skins are attached with wooden poles hung at a slight slant; the upper third of the skins is folded over this invisible mounting, and they hang down loosely, covering a portion of the areas lying

beneath them. Because of their being folded over, both sides of the paint skin are visible in parts, their differences and for the most part, their similarities and correspondences coming into view and revealing the work to be a single visual and material unit. This impression of coherence essentially results from the use of a respective color hue that dominates the paint skins on both sides and over a large surface (for example, a pastel green or a light-gray petroleum blue), which is hemmed above all at the edges with numerous, differently-colored spots, forms, structures from the lower layers of the paint skin structure. It incites the viewer to a gaze that alternates between close-up for the details and distance in order to take in the whole. In doing so, the process of integrating a collage of smaller skins becomes conspicuous. But above all, it is the work in layers, the successive development of the coloration with and from the material, which is clearly recognizable here in all the abundance of possibilities that Gruber has developed.

For her installation works, Christiane Gruber uses skins that are restrained in terms of color. Their respective basic tone is in no way homogeneous, but rather shows a myriad of deviations, fadings, and confusions so that it is not possible to speak of monochromy here. Their colors deny any sort of monochrome idealism and undermine any notion of a pure, bodyless paint. These are regularly contoured, elongated strip lengths, which evoke a more stringent impression of these works.

One group of installations ties in with the smaller wall-oriented objects that take up traditional painting and picture components. For these installations, Gruber leans frames, shaped like wooden stretchers or surrounding outer frames made of blackened metal, against the wall or another architectural element. These point to picture and painting as reference points, suggesting a surface, giving it a concrete format, but without being a painting, however. Instead, these site-specific works are three-dimensional, spatial objects. Because of their matter-of-fact stringency and simplicity of the rectangular frame, they create a stark contrast to the respective soft paint skins that have been freely placed, hang loosely and pucker. Moreover, these are imitation frames – they look like ones, but are not actually functional replicas. Rather, they constitute mountings or a supporting framework, and are thus themselves a thing, an object designed to display the clearly smaller paint skins, to position them in the space and to make them visible. And in doing so, they bring forward the picture as a possibility, refuting it at the same time, and with the paint skins, they present a very idiosyncratic form of dealing with paint as material. Whereas the paint skin-frame works evoke a tension-filled relationship to the picture by making a theme of the difference with their reference to the picture, in her free-hanging works, Christiane Gruber concentrates entirely on the presence of the paint skins, their materiality and dimensions in relationship to the respective room. In this case, both sides of the large format works consisting of various individual pieces are visible. Their view from all sides is immediately evident when walking around them. This perception resulted automatically along a way that led through several stories connected via a stairway, in whose center an extremely elongated strip length of deep green paint skins hung. From up close, it was possible to observe the restrained coloration of this object that could never quite be taken in as a whole and whose materiality could hardly be assessed. By contrast, the bright orange-red of the horizontal format work shown at the Weserburg seemed

ambivalent. Appearing like an enticing, offensive signal from a distance, this work, hung in a high shaft space, seemed from close-up like a captivating visual object warning us about itself, demanding distance. By restricting it to clear forms and a reduced coloration, the particular materiality of the paint skins becomes the focus of attention. It is the material, which may be witnessed in its materiality and which is nothing other than this paint material – with all its idiosyncrasies, its visual potential, and also its endangerment.

From the looks of them, one would never know. The ochre-yellow work exhibited in Berlin, the green one in Bonn, and the red-orange installation at the Weserburg in Bremen are three metamorphoses of one and the same skin. These are not the first states they have ever found themselves in, and it will not be the last one. Further states and conditions may well follow. What temporarily constitutes a work on site becomes material again afterwards. One cannot see this, but all the same it is a fascinating thought that these skins bear within them several (previous) works and also future works, ones not yet realized but conceivable as a possibility – even though not to be imagined.

Jens Peter Koerver