

A New Dimension In Painting

On the „Virtual Space“-paintings of Michael Burges

By Gerhard Charles Rump

It has always been one of the prime targets of painting to transcend the image, to create a pictorial autonomy beyond depiction, to create a kind of space which opens the door to dimensions behind colour, brushwork and motif. The essential flatness of painting – painting is, basically, nothing but a surface changed by colour – may be accepted, or it may be seen as an obstacle to overcome to conjure up images in the viewers' heads.

The invention of central perspective served this purpose, but also the various uses of colour, like the golden background in mediaeval painting, which indicated a transcendental view. The same way, later, colour as such was employed: Wolfgang Schoene, in his book on light in painting (*Ueber das Licht in der Malerei*), spoke about the “transcendental shining light” we know, for instance, from Gruenewald's “Rising Christ”. There, colour is not a representation of physical light, but of transcendence. Baroque ceilings blurred the passage from the third to the second dimension and back, when a painted putto stretched a three-dimensional leg into space, thus making an exact location of the imagery impossible. But illusion, still, was always present as a painted illusion.

Modern Art has probed a lot of different methods. Op Art played with interferences and simultaneous contrast, Barnett Newman tried out the overwhelming of the viewer by essentially monochrome fields of colour, Julio Le Parc, Dan Flavin and others used real light. Yet the image, however “numinous” or transcendental it may have been, remained definable. Even the concaves of Anish Kapoor know the physical boundaries: Their potential of irritation is confined to nearness and the place of action is clear,

This is all completely different in the new works of Michael Burges. Here a new dimension in painting is opened, in which painting is truly transcended, giving up its physical location defined by the viewer’s perception, and transferring itself to the place where an image really becomes an image: Inside the viewer’s head. Conceptually important is that the image seen can, indeed, be perceived, but not located: It hovers freely in space, changes with the movements of the viewer, and nobody can tell, where it “really” is. Except that it acts inside the head. That the image seems to be confined inside a box is accidental: The image would be the same if the box were of infinite size.

The changing of the image through the movement of the viewer also entails a multi-layered nature, as it is mirrored and reflected. This character is impossible to achieve by traditional painting. Thus a degree of complexity is reached, which is oriented towards the viewers’ complex emotional reactions, at the same time reflecting this.

It is important that the transcendence of painting is achieved by painting and that painting is also its starting point. Michael Burges makes use of a technical element, a diffusing pane. This does away with the painted picture as a physical object. The image floats freely in space, changes according to the viewer's position and hasn't got a specific location any more. The viewer is left all alone, and has to permanently re-create the images. Thus they really become transcendental, as everything traditional, like traces of brushwork and physical surface and surface structures is eliminated. Pure pictures, unblemished by physical evidence. Space as such isn't there, it's virtual.

Thus these images open the doors of the Babylonian library inside our minds and call up associative imagery stored in its shelves. And it shows some similarity to quantum physics. A physicist can only measure either the speed or the location of a particle, not both at the same time. So the particle itself, or as such, is inaccessible. The same with the "Virtual Space"-paintings of Michael Burges: They can always only be seen under one aspect by the viewer, one of a series of possible pictorial conditions, one of a "string" of images. The de-materialisation turns them into "white holes": They give off everything and take in nothing. The action is inside our heads.