

Transference

by Anna Mecugni

But what is painting? A coat of paint? Decoration? Representation? A creative gesture? A painted idea? A painted world? A painted painting? (Hans Belting)

The past hundred years have seen artists challenging painting conventions in unprecedented ways. From the beginning of abstraction and collage to Schwitters's assemblages, Rauschenberg's combines and painting as performance and environment, artists have pushed painting to test its unexplored potential. Berlin-based Philipp Fürhofer expands on this tradition of experimentation with painting installations that come to life through his use of glass, spy mirror foil and light.

Dissatisfied with the lack of flexibility in painting on wood and canvas, Fürhofer began to paint on storefront windows, synthetic glass boxes, columns and semi-spheres in 2006. He explained: "The problem was that I could only build up layer after layer, like in Kiefer's paintings. . . . I wanted to be able to change both the background and the top layers as in Photoshop." Typically Fürhofer applies acrylic and oil paint to both sides of the glass. He drips, splashes and blow-dries the paint and uses brushes and palette knives to add the medium as well as to take it away.

The employment of a translucent support and the overlaying of images bring to mind Polke's double-sided transparency paintings of the late 1980s. About two generations younger than Polke, Fürhofer worked as a stage-design assistant for opera productions in Zurich and Berlin in the early 2000s. This experience led him to discover spy mirror foil, which he began incorporating in his work in 2007. The material, also known as "see-through mirror," functions as both a mirror and a transparent surface, depending on the intensity of light. Those standing on the brighter side see a mirror but are seen by those standing on the darker side. Through the simple, ingenious placement of light bulbs and objects behind the glass, Fürhofer effects both experiences for the viewers: When the lights inside the box are switched off, the spy mirror foil becomes a mirror that reflects and includes the viewers and their environment on the external painted surface; when the lights are on, the interior is revealed, generating a completely different image. It is like an X-ray of the body overlapping with a naked-eye photograph of it. Recently the range of ready-made materials placed inside the glass boxes and columns has expanded to encompass plastic plants and bags, cables and black wrap (a heavy-gauge black aluminum foil used in theater to block light). In Fürhofer's hands, painting becomes a tool that bridges heterogeneous

elements. His work embraces the kind of democratic dialogue between painting and everyday materials that Schwitters's Merzbilder enact. "The word Merz," Schwitters wrote in 1919, "essentially denotes the combination of all conceivable materials for artistic purposes, and technically the principle of equal evaluation of the individual materials. . . . The artist creates through the choice, distribution and metamorphosis of the materials."

The themes of creation and transience (*flüchtigkeit*) are fundamental in Fürhofer's work. In reference to *Felsen* (Rock, 2008) and *Winter* (Winter, 2008), presented in this exhibition, Fürhofer affirmed: "Things keep changing. . . . You only see the landscapes so long as the lights are on. If the lights are off the paintings look abstract. I am not interested in a motif. I am interested in creating a world. That's a synthetic creation. It doesn't matter if it's a figure, a landscape or whatever. The point is to create a world in different layers."

Hans Belting, "On Lies and Other Truths of Painting: Several Thoughts for S. P.," in Sigmar Polke: *The Three Lies of Painting* (Ostfildern-Ruit: Cantz, 1997), 129.

Conversation with the artist, Berlin, October 1, 2008.

Fürhofer has seen and experienced the inside of his body in a unique way; a few years ago he undertook heart-transplant surgery to correct a life-threatening birth condition.

Kurt Schwitters, "Die Merzmalerei," *Der Sturm* X, no. 4 (July 1919): 61.

Conversation with the artist.

Catalogue-text for the exhibition »*Transference*«
at Galerie Lena Brüning, Berlin