

2010

Sabine Schaschl: The Use of the Useless

Mireille Gros presents a solo exhibition at Kunsthaus Baselland, which is originated under the influence of her preoccupation with China and in particular with the Chinese philosopher Zhuang Zi. The artist studied at the Basel School of Design with Werner von Mutzenbecher and Werner Jehle, and at Cooper Union in New York with Vito Acconci and Hans Haacke. Mireille Gros spent much time in New York, Liverpool and Barcelona. Extended travels to Italy, Norway, and especially those to West Africa were also important for her work.

In recent years, the focus of Mireille Gros's artistic debate has been almost exclusively directed to China, ever since a grant from the Christoph Merian Foundation made a first extended stay possible. In the course of her intensive studies of the Chinese language and culture, she thereby came across the work of the poet and philosopher Zhuang Zi. The book, named after the philosopher, which includes the famous collections of texts "The true book of the southern floral country" and "The Book of Spontaneity: On the usefulness of uselessness and the culture of slowness", became the main source of inspiration for the artist. Here she discovered a new basic strategy in her artistic activity that allows for more spontaneity, and that revived the supposedly useless or rather questioned it in its uselessness. Unlike her earlier drawings and paintings the recent works are dominated by an experimental, spontaneous and random attitude. In her paintings and drawings the artist uses traditional Chinese materials such as handmade Chinese paper as support or classical Chinese ink as medium.

In her works, gestures and/or materials are often balanced: Where she takes away something, she adds something else; or to a movement, she adds a corresponding counter-movement. Thus resulted paintings executed with the fingertips, or those obtaining their shape by scratching on it with nails or similar objects. Despite the spontaneous process of creation, the pictures often recall fields, flowers, grasses, branches or rivers and rice fields. Already in her earlier works, the artist took no interest in abstraction; in fact everything is figurative for her. She explores the "nothing" to the point where it turns into "something", instead of just moving from the figurative to a certain point of abstraction. This approach can also be found in the recent works, but paired with sensitivity towards a spontaneous attitude.

Even in the photographs this fundamental attitude is noticeable. The snapshot of a shadow or the last resting-place of disused Buddha figures (male and female) is detained: If nothing else the fast faces the slow from a thematic point of view.

In a spatially conceived installation, Mireille Gros goes back to a large number of sheets, developed over a long period of time, where she focused on capturing Chinese culture by means of the Chinese characters. Glued together and re-used as a surface for drawing, the artist returns to the supposedly useless something valuable: as carrier of words and thoughts the ensemble develops into an elaborate installation in which the recipient may get lost in details. Here, too, memories of previous work come into mind, in which the artist uses the whole universe to inspire new works. The zooming back and forth from micro- to macrocosm, from "Gros" to "Detail", still remains an important starting point of her work.

2003

Claudia Spinelli  
circulo de bellas artes madrid 2003

The work of Mireille Gros is adapted from primeval forms, archetypes, and the tiniest particles which are the origin of life. Time and again she returns to these microscopic worlds, creating an almost spiritual presence with her small-celled, amorphous and plant-like forms. Mireille Gros' fragile oeuvre is composed primarily of drawings and paintings, but also includes photographs and videos. For years now, the artist has drawn her inspiration from organic forms. Transformed into drawings, her gaze moves freely between observation and imagination. Her drawings and painting cross the boundaries of the representational. They draw ethereal links to a dream-like world beyond language and definition.

2003

Andreas Langenbacher

When they're not on their way to an exhibition in Paris, New York or Berne, they're colorfully arrayed side by side in her Basel or Paris studio: small notebooks that have, over the years, grown into a big family and a veritable encyclopaedia - Mireille Gros Color Books. In their bright bindings, they radiate the aura of a butterfly that has just floated down out of the vast sky, its wings gracefully folded, but ready to amaze us with the fragile variegation of its visual substance. It is over twenty years since Mireille Gros, born in Aargau in 1954, began recording her impressions in conveniently sized notebooks: making sketches, collages, photos and notes; recording, drawing, pasting - one might almost say "planting" her thoughts and perceptions. And today the collection has grown to 144 consecutively numbered volumes, not just an organically growing library, but a kaleidoscopic cosmos of images, trails and traces. A universe that could be described metaphorically as exploring its own background noise and framing its cognitive theory as a serial, a novel leading from the world of Objects to the burgeoning of artistic representation. Leavened and held together by the yeast of a now coolly observing, now emphatically involved eye for analogies, correspondences, convergences, interferences, allusions, even figural alliterations between the organically grown and the artificially formed world - as suggested by physical expansion of the universe. Food for table and for thought - Pythagorean dinner music - a fragment of the infinite as a pattern imprinted on the profanest of objects. Who would not want to eat off such plates and become a part of such telluric events. As intimate diaries and structuralist analyses, Mireille Gros's artist notebooks inhabit a fragile in-between: between seeing and the seen, the grain of sand and the dune, eye and hand, idea and image, figure and object. Every page is a kind of spore, a seed-pod waiting for the flutter of an eyelid or zephyr of a breath to lift it up and carry it away, so it can embed itself elsewhere and continue to thrive in the most concrete of Platonic realities.

2008

Susanne Kudielka: Zoom on places elsewhere

Mireille Gros' artistic preoccupation is the relationship between art and nature. Over the years she developed her own concept by painting and drawing as well as through photography and video to investigate their affinities. Plants, water surfaces and landscapes belong to her favourite motifs, which she likes to explore the "Petite Camargue Alsacienne". a nature reserve outside of Basel along the French side of the Rhine valley. Using different medias and technologies she is producing series and sequences of images oscillating between observation and imagination. Her characteristic zooming on the subject creates a highly sensual atmosphere inviting us to discover our natural environs by visual approach.

2001

Interview with Mireille Gros by Marie-Laure Bernadac

MLB This color book carries the name of the exhibition „émergence“. It contains many different drawings that were compiled and pasted in its pages.

MG I use them to prepare the exhibition, to develop my vocabulary of forms.

MLB Some of the motifs are quite different from the plant and vegetable motifs so characteristic of your work. The compositions, too, are different. There are fewer single subjects, the pages are fuller, some even entirely covered with tiny cells.

MG A reduction took place. When you look through a microscope or a telescope you often see a similar picture. I don't differentiate between abstract and figurative drawing. By changing my position and thereby my perspective, I'm freer. Near meets far.

MLB Micro- and macrocosms are infact ever present in your work, for example in your latest photographs.

MG Yes, the pools could just as well be small cells or maria on the surface of the moon.

MLB There are even drawings of human figures in this book. That is rather seldom in your work.

MG It's a birth, an attempt to capture the beginning (Anfangeinfangen).

- MLB All of your work appears to be a hymn to nature, in all her forms, to the embryo, to growth, to the vegetal, to the primary elements, and in particular, to water. Has this interest always been present?
- MG All that I know is that as a child I used to spend my entire days drawing, experiences and things I invented. Even this color book here is full of inventions.
- MLB Is drawing fundamental to you?
- MG I began painting later. The colors are what attracted me. The means, be it painting or drawing, are secondary. For me, it's more important to create and to follow my inner visions.
- MLB Is the technique really so unimportant? Doesn't it influence your work? Upon visiting your ateliers it appeared clear to me that there is a place for painting and another for drawing. And now there is photography as well. Everything appears to be related, and nevertheless these activities are clearly separated in time and place.
- MG Drawing is practical... it often happens when I'm on the move. All I need is a pencil and paper – and that means freedom. Drawing is spontaneous. Painting implies the creation of space with colors. That represents another dimension.
- MLB Painting appears to be a bit like a “kitchen” with all the pots, cans, ingredients, pigments, binders, oils...
- MG It's a laboratory.  
To come back to beginnings and to all the colors - I have one childhood memory of when I was ill. I started to put order into my color pencils and this made me feel so happy that I immediately felt much better and was healthy again.
- MLB Putting order in the emotions...?
- MG A further childhood experience comes to mind. At Christmas I received a doll from my mother. She had gone to a lot of trouble, sewn many clothes for it and could hardly wait to see my surprise. My uncle gave me a box of color pencils. I started to draw under the Christmas tree and was oblivious to everything else. My mother was devastated and cried.
- MLB Your evocation of childhood experiences reminds me of the video that you produced using films of yourself as a child. Do you feel the need to go back to your sources, to explore your origins?
- MG Not only – on the one hand my father's home movies are material which exists and is available to me, and on the other they intensify the examination of my childhood memories.  
As a child, I “knew” things, which I later had to give up because they didn't correspond to the “truth”. I left an entire world behind which had worked very well for me and in which I was happy. Another reality took its place. More than ever, I discover that there are many truths and countless realities. Observation and conscious perception allow me to partially correct my own memories.
- MLB That allows you to travel back and forth between truth and untruth, illusion and reality. Before, while you recounted the story of putting order in your color pencils, it occurred to me that you are very concerned with order and method in your work. It appears to me as if you have a need to put order in the universe, whether it is when you are fabricating a color book, or through your interest in science, or your own observations.

- MG Putting order into things allows me to plunge back into chaos. Order-disorder as a means of going with the flow of life. There is a rhythm to chaos. My books thrive on chaos or at least they grow free of intentions. Order emerges at the moment a decision is taken. Should I paste these drawings in the books, keep them or throw them away? Although the decision is taken rapidly and rather unconsciously, over time I come to realize that the drawings I keep are similar and that a new order has been created.
- MLB Actually, there is an aspect of recycling in your work. Your point of departure is an existing landscape or material. This is particularly true of your drawings where you take advantage of the color of the paper you use, it's structure and motives, it's smooth or rough surface. The films and photographs that you reuse are also a reserve of given images. Is this also true of your painting?
- MG Yes, the principle is similar. I often begin priming a new painting with the paint left over from the previous. The question remains the same: How do I start? How can I catch the commencement? Is there a beginning? Maybe there is none.
- MLB Yes, because you start with what already exists.
- MG It's like an endless loop with no beginning and no end. I dive into an inner universe, and sometimes don't even know when exactly I start working. It's more like gliding back into a cycle.
- MLB You appear just as interested in the creative process - in what precisely happens between the mind and the emotions, between the hand and the question of origins, as in the process of the creation of the work which originates in itself, like a living organism. These are two different perspectives on the creator and on creation.
- MG This method came into being over time. It is hardly possible to determine when something starts because I work in cycles, successions and with themes.
- MLB Like the themes water and flow, which you apparently like very much.
- MG Actually I don't really prefer water to other elements. I am fascinated by the twilight zones, like the zone between water and earth. Water touches earth and life emerges. This unclearly defined, intermediate zone between fluid and solid, is an invitation for creation. It's an (emotional) pool - all I have to do is dive in and from there things come on their own.
- MLB You let yourself be imbued. You wait until your work grows, ripens, develops.
- MG My drawings illustrate this process. Actually they aren't plants, but lines that grow.
- MLB Nevertheless, there are stalk-, or leaf-like lines, elements that are erect.
- MG The plants develop with no predetermined intention. I concentrate on the paper and take pleasure in the traces of the pencil. The plants grow by themselves.
- MLB So it's the lines that grow. What if we were to talk about the techniques you employ? You use all sorts of paper, color pencils and pencils. You experiment.
- MG It has to remain an adventure. If you always use the same means you run the risk of applying a recipe or of striving for virtuosity. I take the risk of change and prefer to restart from zero.
- MLB As if to give up all the knowledge you have.

MG Knowledge can be both a help and a hindrance. It has to be put aside to leave room for intuition. But it can be called upon at any time.

MLB And photography? What brought you to photography? Is it the reflection of what you see in the landscape?

MG I came to photography more or less by coincidence. I bought a camera to document my pictures. One day, while I was taking a walk, I discovered my paintings - so to speak practically lying on the ground. All I had to do was to pick them up, or better said, to take a picture. This occurred "absent-mindedly", and was unintentional. My photographs are images of my paintings that I find in the outside world. That's why I see my work as an ensemble comprising drawing, painting and photography.

MLB This ensemble has been joined by the moving pictures of video. What about sound?

MG Yes, I am very interested in relating images with sound. I also play several instruments.

MLB In fact there is something musical in your work - themes and variations, rhythms and lines, the melody of the colors. You create a dialogue between different artistic forms. What role does language have in your work?

MG I collect certain words. Words like "encyclopedic" for example. I made lists of words that I find particularly evoking in different languages and translations, the passage from one language to another, interest me.

MLB Who are your favorite artists? Are there artists who are especially important to you?

MG Actually, there is hardly anything that does not influence me: Painting, nature, the courtyard in Belleville, the news, everyday life, pictures in museums, pictures in daily life. One entire color book is devoted to Matisse and his tones of red. Other books are about the palettes used by Delacroix, Monet, El Greco, about prehistoric painting in the caves in the Périgord, about the Venice school. I always also look at paintings from really close up. I particularly like Delacroix's palette and the freedom in his approach to colors. The above-mentioned painters hardly used pure yellow or pure red. They embedded an almost yellow or an almost red in color environments in which these colors appear as bright yellow or red. In my dreams I see the color palettes of "my" painters. Subjects and names disappear and orgiastic color plays take their place.

MLB In your atelier, one immediately becomes aware of this love for colors. In the way the pigments are classified, the way they are set on the shelves.

MG It's like the keyboard of a piano of colors.

MLB But in your paintings the blue-green tones predominate.

MG ... yes, but nevertheless I use all the pigments. What interests me most is the balance between the colors and their temperatures. The above-mentioned painters all had a strong sensitivity for the balance of the colors' temperatures - it is never too hot. Sometimes when I have to interrupt my painting in order to go shopping for food for example, my sensitivity for this equilibrium is distracted by all the colors of the products on the shelves in the supermarket.

In order to please their customers Kodak produces films that intensify the impression of sunny weather and heat the colors artificially. In nature, however, color temperature is at equilibrium.

- MLB How did you conceive the exhibition project titled “e.emergence” for Bern and Vevey? At the outset it consisted only of drawings. Later paintings, photographs, video and etchings came to join them.
- MG A theme helps me to structure my work and to concentrate. My working themes often span a few years. They help me to reunite the diverse means of expression, for example: Tour d’horizon – tour d’océan  
Entre 2 eaux – monde nano)  
e.émergence – Anfangeinfangen  
One theme often leads to another. New questions arose from “Réserves Naturelles (Nature preserves) such as: What is a drawing? How do I capture the beginning or conception? What does the picture of conception look like?  
“e.emergence” helps to structure the different means of expression like drawing, photography, etchings, etc.
- MLB What does the nano world mean to you?
- MG The idea that there is no such thing as abstract or figurative art. It’s fun to think things differently, to change their places or to do them backwards, and end up discovering similar pictures. It all depends on whether you take a microscope or a telescope. Actually it’s all a matter of which lens one chooses or which perspective. Rather than start from a figure and then render it abstract, I explore nothing until something reveals itself. The nano world is a metaphor. It is both abstract and figurative. The search for beginnings is also a subject matter of present day astrophysics, as in “The Great Unification Theory” (GUT).  
In the nano world questions such as “What is matter?” are asked. To date, no one can answer that question precisely.
- MLB You unify creativity and creation, the creation of the world and of a work.  
The origin of creativity and of creation.
- MG Catching conception, birth and death...  
Where do we come from? Who are we? Where are we going? as Gauguin expressed it, for example. The questions are always the same.
- MLB Many artists tortured themselves with the question of death. You seem to be more attracted to life, to the organic, to light and to birth.
- MG When I was in West Africa, in the Ivory Coast, it was described to me that woman possessed the secret of birth and men the secret of death - the beginning and the end. I perceived the people I came to know in Africa as being more authentic and closer to “truth”. Even with little preliminary knowledge, you can sense this when you are there. It related me back to own childhood, and reminded me of the magical world I lived in then, of my childhood “truths”.  
The people there appear to be less distracted than we are and they mirror another image of humanity, perhaps a more original one.
- MLB Does it have something to do with a different relationship to time?
- MG Yes, African dancing, for example, expresses this. There is neither a beginning nor an end. There are different passages and changes with flowing transitions. I feel more comfortable

within such cyclic being. Germination occurs within a tender flow. At different moments, different truths reveal themselves.

MLB That sounds like interior work. Doesn't this stand in contradiction to our contemporary world?

MG It's a back and forth. As much as I need to quench my thirst for information, I also have to draw back and take my distance.

MLB You certainly have the time required by your work, your pencils, your painting utensils and materials.

MG Sometimes, when I'm absorbed by my work, I imagine two beings looking over my shoulders. On the left a prehistoric person, on the right an alien. Both attempt to understand what it is I am doing. My goal is to create something that both could grasp.