

Martina Klein _gelb_

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Perception in the Light of Change

By Lynn Kost

In everyday life, we usually rely intuitively on our perception. But the systematic scrutiny of perception has contributed significantly to the development of human thought and action. Alongside the sciences and philosophy, the visual arts contribute to this continuous reflection on perception in their own way. Within the discipline of painting in particular, its historical engagement with questions of perception is well established and can be traced in its changing approaches to aesthetics. Inspired by these antecedents, Martina Klein has for many years minutely investigated the impact of paint, colour, material and space on – visual, spatial, tactile – perception. By emphasising sensual perception and contemplation equally, her works enable viewers to reflect their own perception in the act of contemplation.

Klein is a classically trained painter. She learned her craft from bottom up. At the beginning of her career she painted pictures rooted in realist traditions. Looking back, she describes her education as an excellent school of seeing. She dove deep into her paintings, until the coloured paints themselves became more important than the motifs they depicted. This fascination for materiality and preoccupation with its sensual appearance led Klein to monochrome painting and the fundamental questions of perception and contemplation. As Ad Reinhardt repeatedly captured in his cartoons “How to Look”, abstract painting triggered a fundamental paradigm shift. Abstract paintings no longer showed illusionistic images through which the painting itself becomes secondary in the act of looking. Instead, they demand unmitigated attention to the act of painting, to the materiality of colour and surface. Viewers can continuously revise and reconfigure their own perception with reference to such paintings. They invite us to think about the processes of looking. For “... looking isn’t as simple as it looks”,¹ as Ad Reinhardt puns in this context. He emphasises the constitutive role of the viewers’ perception in abstract painting. No monochrome canvas is perceived in exactly the same way twice. The continuously shifting contexts that frame the act of contemplation change the appearance of the work. Martina Klein’s work re-examines these reciprocal interactions between work of art, contemplation and context. It is among her most defining qualities that despite her conceptual orientation, she never neglects the emotional impact of an artwork. While she lets viewers catch a glimpse behind the scenes of the complex interplay of production, presentation and contemplation, she simultaneously reveals an enchanting sensuality.

1 Ad Reinhardt, “How to Look at Things through a Wine-Glass” (1946), in *How to Look*, Ad Reinhardt Art Comics (New York 2013), p. 41. First Publication: *How to Look at Things*, P.M., July 7, 1946

Klein quickly grasped that as a painter examining the perceptual conditions of contemplation she could not avoid the question of the object. Frank Stella had unequivocally introduced this fact to the discourse on painting with his “Black Paintings” and “Shaped Canvas” as early as 1960, laconically stating in

2 Frank Stella, "Bruce Glaser: Questions to Stella and Judd", radio conversation, broadcast February 1964 on WBAI-FM (New York; edited by Lucy R. Lippard and published as "Questions to Stella and Judd" in: Art News, vol. 65, No. 5. Sept. 1966, pp. 55 – 61.

an interview that: "Any painting is an object and anyone who gets involved enough in this finally has to face up to the objectness of whatever it is that he's doing. He's making a thing."² For Donald Judd and other protagonists of Minimal Art these ideas led to a rejection of painting and ultimately to a new concept of sculpture. Many of Martina Klein's works engage with this deconstruction of painting into its constituent parts such as its support (frame), surface (canvas, wood), paint and its dependency on the perception of the viewer and respective position in space. Even though an emphasis on "objectness" strongly characterizes her art from the beginning, her work cannot be subsumed in the tradition of Minimal Art. Klein remains an unerring champion of painting. Her goal is not to overcome painting, but to sustain a coherent examination of the possibilities of this ancient medium. She does this by looking at the material of paint, not just its abstract appearance but its physical and sensual qualities. Her paintings render tangible the countless factors that come together to make up the perception of a painting: colour, light, application of paint, canvas, support, placement, context and change. Viewers can grasp this intuitively while contemplating her work, without ever having read any colour theory or art history.

Our perception of colour differs. A large part of that fact is its structure, which in turn depends on its application with fluid or impasto paint. Changing light conditions demonstrate this especially well. Klein's canvasses are characterised by restrained, regular applications of paint. Expressive gestures and dynamism are restrained in favour of maximising the radiance of colour. By mounting the canvasses on exposed wooden panels, Klein demonstrates the extent to which the colour ultimately depends on the perception of the viewer. Walls and floors are the natural reference points for paintings. As a rule, paintings are hung on walls and flat, fully stretched frames create a homogenous parallel between work and space. But in Klein's case the paintings are only loosely attached to their own support. Its constructed nature becomes explicitly visible and their L-shape breaks with the verticality of the wall. The paintings can even be placed free-standing on a table, a shelf or on the floor. These autonomous paintings borrow the site-specific conditions explicitly for the duration of an exhibition.

In this kind of flexible, temporary symbiosis the sense of colour and atmosphere of both painting and space changes. It is also decisive that the viewers let go of their fixed expectations of painting. Only those who move around and take different points of view can fully perceive the work. In illusionistic or figurative painting this is usually irrelevant, since the position of the viewer in space is predetermined by the perspective coding of the image. Klein's monochrome painting however forces the viewers to move and thereby demonstrates that it exist only in multiple perspectives. To form an image of the work in its entirety, the viewer must assemble the continually changing impressions from different perspectives. Only the process of changing perception creates the image; in a sense it is created anew in each and every moment. Beyond that, it becomes clear that the attractiveness and attraction of colour depends to a large extent on how stretcher frames, canvas etc. "present" it. Monochrome paintings in particular depend not on colour alone, but on the balance of all their components. "The pictures consist of material, environment and viewer", Klein herself points out.³ This preoccupation with the context sensitivity of painting has emerged more strongly in Klein's work of recent years. Besides the factors that change the perception of painting and those that change the perception of the viewer, the artist has recently become more interested in concrete changes as a result of interventions by collectors, curators and the art system in general.

3 Martina Klein, in:
*l'air nécessaire à la vie oder die
freude an der veränderung ununter-
brochen*, Köln 2013, p. 157



Martina Klein
*_gelb_, correlation heated
(Korrelaton, erhitzt)*, 2020



Martina Klein,
_ausdehnen, 2020
Oil paint on coton,
100 × 65 × 27 cm

Even in its title, the work *_gelb_, Korrelation erhitzt* (2020) in this exhibition emphasises the reciprocal relationships that Martina Klein's works foreground so well. She painted twenty paintings in shades of cool yellow (some clearly differentiated, others very similar), in five different sizes but always with the same proportions. These canvases are mounted on L-shaped wood panels. They are evenly distributed standing close to each other on three metal shelving units of the type found in warehouses. There are invariably overlaps in the views into and through the shelves, condensations that illuminate different facets of the colour yellow. In the light and shadow of the overlapping paintings, viewers perceive a continuously changing palette of yellows. It will appear obvious to most viewers, considering their previous experiences of exhibitions, that this must be an installation. Although that is correct, it is only a half-truth. For the accumulation in the shelves is based on the artist's refusal to hang the paintings in space. Usually, the precise placement of paintings in the specific conditions of an exhibition space is a significant component of Martina Klein's work. Whenever possible, Klein does not present individual art works, viewed autonomously of their surroundings, but sensual impressions that consider the unity of work, space and viewers. Of course, her refusal to situate the works in space and instead depositing them on an ordinary product-shelf in a corner, is actually a continuation of this approach. But because the walls of the large space remain completely empty, the viewer intuitively perceives the situation as incomplete. The work cleverly links the artist's reticence to finalize the exhibition with a challenge to the viewers to take on the task – be it in their minds, or more concretely by acquiring a work. For it is a condition of sale for the works that the selected painting is hung at a specific place within the gallery space selected by the buyer. The tools to mount the work are ready nearby.

Thus the expectation that a painting must take its position on a wall is fulfilled after all. In accordance with Klein's ambiguous way of thinking the work can also be placed on the floor. Those who choose that option will inevitably think about the relationship between their own action and all the other elements in the space, what form the exhibition takes as a result of their decision. On the reverse of the painting it is recorded who installed the work, who created it and in what position in space it is placed. The buyers thereby become more than merely the owners of a work: they are active co-creators of the exhibition. If no one takes on the task, the yellow paintings stay in their depository. The participation of the viewers is a central aspect of Martina Klein's work. Engaging with Klein's work always means a continuous, situationally adaptive reflection on one's own perception, points of view, expectations, situations in space, lighting conditions, art history and even current mood. With the work *gelb, Korrelation erhitzt* however, Klein involves the viewer far beyond mental reflection. She turns buyers and viewers into visible collaborators who change the work according to their own criteria of perception, their experience of space and economic dispositions. Klein thereby demonstrates how dependent art is on the interactions between artists, the publics, the art market, its entire systemic environment. Paintings do not exist autonomously. Many factors and people are involved in their creation and change them continuously. The work *_ausdehnen* (2020) also pushes the limits of reflection on exhibition and perception. The point of departure is once again the wooden L-shaped support typical of Klein's work. On its horizontal surface, covered by the painted canvas, the artist places a lump of fresh paint. It not only represents the colour of the painting, but is that colour. In the present aggregate condition it provokes the desire to touch, to experience its consistency and smell. The differences in perception to its processed condition on canvas are striking. It becomes clear that a painting is made up of raw materials in



Martina Klein
Schwarz und Grün, 2018
Coton, oil paint (Ivory black)
95 × 61 cm, metal can 19 cm high
and diameter 14 cm
Wooden construction:
76 × 61 × 29 cm



Martina Klein
sitzen, 2019
Oil paint on coton on wood with
metal stool, 90 × 70 × 30 cm /
28 × 30 × 18 cm (stool)

combination with a long chain of decisions, processes, technical skills and aesthetic judgements. The work is a development of a previous piece, *Black and Green* (2018), which already united elements of painting, object, installation, material, conceptual art and readymade. Instead of a lump of paint, Klein had placed a tin of paint on the painting. Frank Stella once said about his art: "I try to leave the paint as good as it was in the can".⁴ Marcel Duchamp claimed sarcastically that all paintings are only assisted readymades, since the paint is ready made in the tube. The work *_ausdehnen_* (schwarz) however, shows that Klein's paintings are handmade from the ground up and conceived as an homage to painting, especially to the uniqueness, radiance and mutability of colour. Even when Klein systematically analyses all aspects of painting, what follows is not conceptual art. The paint does not come from a tin nor is it industrially processed. The emphasis on the unpredictability of materials and processes are a central and constitutive element. Klein's works can only be experienced through the sensual perception of the viewer interacting with the work in real space. Description, text or reproduction do not offer an adequate replacement for this experience.

Perception also requires time. Klein chose the corridor for the installation of the work *_sitzen_* (2019). The corridor reinforces the element of movement. Many people pass by the work on their way from one space to the next. Part of the work is a folding stool: implying both immobility and mobility, it invites the viewers to take their time, maybe take a seat and immerse themselves in a deeper form of contemplation. Though this means accepting both continuous interruption and obstructing the space for others. In this situation the challenge for the viewer is to find not just their own perspective but also the right timing for a moment of quiet contemplation. Tranquillity and movement collide and are forced to engage, to find the balance required for contemplative sensual perception. Martina Klein's sophisticated, radical approach to painting allows us to experience these omnipresent interdependencies.