Im Bau der Menschlichkeit Martina Klein

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Martina Klein - *Im Bau der Menschlichkeit*
Text by David Khalat

"Painting gives visible existence to what profane vision believes to be invisible; [...] The eye dwells in this texture as man dwells in his house."
– Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Eye and Mind[1]

„Im Bau der Menschlichkeit" is an open-ended title. It points to the provisional and the possible: the building site, the stage, and the playground all at once. At Galerie Tschudi Zurich, Martina Klein brings together two bodies of work that reinterpret the relationship between plane, color, and space: seven works on paper that read like precisely composed yet variable scores and floor-based cardboard constructions that tip from a plane into space, setting it in motion. Both bodies of work propose how perception comes about, not once and for all, but as the result of decisions. They are an invitation to think along, to look along, and to co-negotiate the object.

The works on paper begin with found materials, such as filing folders, cardboard, and pre-printed, toned papers from color fan systems. The artist mounts six or seven strips of the same material across the full width, creating pockets. She then inserts toned papers with subtle gradients, cut into shapes selected from studio finds, into these pockets. The arrangements are carefully composed yet not fixed. They may remain as they are or be reordered. This calibrated fugitivity is not an expression of arbitrariness, but rather, it is integral to the work – a composition that makes a decision while keeping the possibility of another decision visible.

The hanging remains true to its simple, almost austere materiality. It is fixed to a nail, and a plexiglass panel hangs in front. The plexiglass creates a minimal distance, gathers the layers, and sharpens the view of the edges, overlaps, and shadows. Seven sheets form a closed yet unfinished series: each piece maintains its composition and leaves it open.

The cardboard constructions emerge rigorously from the plane. Each one has a single point of departure—a flat, planar starting point. From there, the volume unfolds into space without enclosing it. How long does the form remain open? When does it become an object, a „closed" figure? These works defy clear genre labels. Are they models, sculptures, or paintings? Above all, they are artworks – phenomenological set-pieces that generate volume from the plane, not in it.

The associations are deliberately multivalent: plans, dunes, slides, and steps – small stages that send the eyes strolling, jumping, reclining, and contorting. Color introduces measured objectivity, accentuates edges, shifts weights, and marks directions. A silver spray adds another element of disruption: Is it metallic, or does it simply set an industrial tone, hinting at infrastructure?

[1]Maurice Merleau-Ponty: "Eye and Mind." In: The Primacy of Perception, ed. James M. Edie, trans. Carleton Dallery. Evanston (IL): Northwestern University Press, 1964.

Klein conceives these constructions as a painter. For years, she has aimed to understand color not as the surface of an object, but as a spatial arrangement: monochrome planes that „choreograph“ space through their relationships. Composition emerges between the works, in the room, and with the viewers. Against this background, the cardboard constructions are a step towards concentration. „I wanted to create something compact, bundled as a spatial and compositional matter,“ says the artist. Color „comes along“ – not added afterwards, but as an integral part of the spatial figure. While earlier works allowed the viewer to perceive angles, intervals, and interstices more freely, the new forms condense these possibilities into concrete proposals that viewers can experience firsthand.

The term „painting in space“ serves as a touchstone here, a historically charged expression with roots in modernism. One might think of Alexander Calder and his „drawings in space,“ which translated linearity and spatial extension into three dimensions. It sharpens Klein’s propositions without subsuming them; her objects are not kinetic, they guide the eye.
Klein’s canvases are often monochrome. However, what matters is not a single color, but rather, how colors relate to each other. How do the wall and floor respond? What tension arises between two tones, between matte and glossy, or between a signal hue and a mixed color? In the cardboard constructions, the use of color is directly linked to geometry: blue, yellow, red, green, and white appear as clear markers that meet fragmented, mixed tones which articulate or dissolve volume. Here, color is not decoration, but rather a means of producing space – a precise form of space-making.

In both bodies of work, Klein deliberately uses studio materials, such as cardboard, folders, toned papers, and sprays. These materials are intended for display, packaging, and temporary use. The irony of circumstances is that these materials are no longer cheap; however, their semantics remain those of provisionality, utility, and unpretentiousness. There is a distant echo of Arte Povera – not as a citation, but as a shift in value regimes through „base“ substances. At the same time, there is an affinity with Minimal Art, including reduction to simple means, clarity of propositions, emphasis on materiality, and phenomenological experience in space, such as seriality, measure, and relation rather than narration. In this sense, Klein’s work aligns with an attitude, not iconic forms: precision through restraint and a mode of perception fulfilled only in the relationship between the work, the object, the site, and the viewer.

Here, „humanity“ is not a grand, emotional term, but rather the smallest common denominator. The questions are: How do we perceive? What do we perceive? Which decisions – even the small, everyday ones – shape our way of seeing? As a basic concept touching on politics, art, culture, and society, humanity is constantly evolving. This exhibition is not political, yet it reads as political because it addresses fundamentals such as attention, relationships, and the interconnectedness of things, spaces, and people.

The works on paper maintain an open composition without relativizing it. The cardboard constructions compress space without fully closing it. Together, they create an architecture of looking, where painting becomes a spatial practice that gathers and redistributes possibilities. „Im Bau der Menschlichkeit“ reminds us that making something visible is also a form of co-construction and that „humanity“ is the sober question of how perception is shared.