

*As the snowflakes sink without trace
in the billows of the grey ocean,
so humanity succumbs in the maelstrom of time.*

Toyota ma Tsuno

BLURRING THE TRACES

On Eliška Bartek's recent pictures

Matthias Haldemann*

The more recent pictures of Eliška Bartek (since 1990) are direct and alien, allowing no gradual acquaintance. Their structure — simple, horizontally ordered bands of colour — is seemingly quickly grasped; even the metallic tones at first give little cause for contemplation. The pictures appear crude and unwelcoming. Yet they are not irrelevant, but rather invoke an uneasy feeling, if no anxiety. Subliminally they build an emotional tension that one cannot merely withdraw from, and little by little they evolve an insinuating attraction.

Direct as the pictures are, there is little to reveal their underlying craft. An adroit painting technique ensures that at the finish no brushstroke is discernible, the genesis of the works remains hidden behind their thus heightened visual impact. The colours have spread of their own accord within boundaries set by the artist, have touched and overlapped, run into each other and ultimately soaked into the canvas. These processes are replicated in the viewer. Smears, blots, smudged edges — commonly deemed shortcomings in painting — here serve to take one into an assemblage of colour in flux, opening up a new depth beyond any clearly articulated, chromatically defined space (foreground bright and warm tones — distance darker and colder). It comes from the layered application of the paint. Bartek works with two ground and two surface colours combined in different ways, with the undermost layer everywhere remaining influentially visible and in some places (mainly at the edges) emerging unadorned.

The pictures' clearly conceived structure (ordered rows and colour scale) thus contrasts with an indefinite, unfathomable body of colour. The contrast is sharpened by Bartek finally adding a fluid glaze, the sheen of which obscures the painting, closing it off from the outside. The artistic method consists as it were in laying repeated grounds and then veiling them. Preparing and finishing the canvas are as significant as creating the work. Pointers to the actual painting operation, indeed to the picture itself, are missing. Instead, between stratified ground and glaze there exists somehow a void which draws and holds the eye. In the picture one perceives its own absence; it has sort of escaped, as Bartek says. This despite the boldness of the colours and the schematic clarity of form. In some of the works, isolated, gently modulated traces pass across the canvas as final human touches, but these, too, dissolve on closer scrutiny, apertures with no essence of their own, disclosing the matt undersurface.

These disorientatingly «picture-less» pictures instil a feeling of emptiness and distance. The character of the colours contributes to this: chiefly violet and blue, occasionally also yellow, green or ochre are mixed with white and black, emanating cold energy or distant warmth, a subdued and ponderous air, or icy in spite of their often veritably glowing luminance, all on the verge of dissipating, dissolving, submerging. They are pictures of leave-taking, settling for a moment like breath on a windowpane, only to evaporate into nothing. Longing and melancholy are near at hand, and yet they contain meditative calm and infinite farness imbued with diaphanous wreaths of mysterious light.

By virtue of their escaped pictoriality, Bartek's poetically sensuous paintings (with many links to the Japanese lyric) exert a force akin to the whirlpool, and point to that ineluctable horizon where differences blend

in dissolution.

*Dark red the moon falls
behind the distant mountains. My heart is heavy
with longing for the lanterns of eternity.*

Suehiro

* Kunsthaus Zug