

AWE AND FRANCIS

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Speaking to Christian Awe, one is instantly taken in by the artist's carefree charm: Is it the Simplicius Simplicissimus of painting talking here, stumbled into the great art adventure almost as if by accident? Awe hails from the former GDR, from the Berlin district Lichtenberg, and was eleven years old when the wall fell. The gray reality of the very real Socialist everyday, morphed into a vacuum of apparently unlimited possibilities. So what do you do when the regulated, everyday structure suddenly falls away? What do you do on the streets? Where to with the creativity? Playing Basketball ("street ball," to be precise; Awe was once German champion) and trying out the usual "stuff". Although we're not really sure if we want to know exactly what "stuff" was tried out: Isn't it a blessing that the good old spray can was there to produce the desired "kick", the yearned-for thrill? The vacuum, the gray – all that had to be filled with color and gesture, and fast, because it was (and is) forbidden, just a few seconds and the painting is already done – as the train stations and railway cars can attest.

At home there was no particular connection to art. Spraying graffiti was the way into painting, and for that, the Berlin of the early 1990s was the perfect stage. School is over and one starts to look for an occupation that unites the things that Graffiti characterizes especially well: color and speed, in other words, the ability to disappear quickly. Christian Awe wants to be an art and sports teacher. He applies to the Hochschule der Künste in Berlin, becomes the student of an artist he assures he had never heard of before, though given the name it is hard to believe: Georg Baselitz. He gives up his dream of becoming a teacher, devotes himself completely to art and becomes a "Meisterschüler / Masterstudent" of Daniel Richter, under whom he graduates.

What remains of graffiti are the large formats, the speed with which the paint is applied or at least the impression that the paintings were produced this way, and the luminous colors. Upon closer inspection, you realize that the process is actually much more in-depth; the first glance is not always the most reliable. Not only because the painting materials are so different: spray and acrylic paints can be combined with India ink and watercolors, doodles with Sharpies and wax oil pastels can be drawn on, scraped off and scratched out.

Various everyday materials and found objects are assimilated Pollock-style: fabric scraps, boxes, napkins and curtains that, when sprayed over, leave a fragmented, regular pattern on the surface of the image. Currently he is painting on PVC and transferring it to canvas; this way, the artist says, the colors are more luminous, and some of the pictures become more malleable: For example the work "Being" appears concave, something like Gotthard Graubner's "reverse" color space bodies.

Awe's paintings oscillate between figurative and abstract; for his generation there is of course no need to decide one specific "direction" or another. His figures - often formed by the white contours of omission, making them appear very distanced - seem to be taken from the glossy photographs of beautiful bodies from the world of sports. They appear almost as "abstract" as the "splish-splash" paint waves in the other non-figurative paintings, one of which is not titled "IASUKOH", or "HOKUSAI" backwards for nothing - the early 19th century Japanese artist whose "waves" have become something like the "model wave" of the Moderns. Presently, it is Awe's non-figurative work that seems to dominate, so a look around for comparisons stands to reason: the (apparent) restriction to gesture and material is of course no invention of our time, and of course Awe's gesture is not so carefree either: the idea of Abstract Expressionism and the Informel bears on the two dominant art trends after the Second World War.

The combination and confrontation of Awe's paintings with Sam Francis' reminds one of this and has, with all the recklessness of comparison, something very compelling. It is that which Harald Rosenberg called "Action Painting", this game with movement and paint visible on the surface: time, movement and space become one.

"Action Painting" was the art of a new beginning, was the zero hour after the catastrophes of the 20th century; it was the radical concentration on the essentials of painting. Sam Francis was a typical representative of this direction, though he also belonged to the generation that helped design this new beginning, always conscious of the tradition in which he and others felt tied. Francis (1923-1994), who originally had wanted to become a doctor, suffered severe injuries as a soldier in the Second World War and was forced to lie for a prolonged period of time on his stomach in a plaster cast. In this position, he began to paint on sheets of paper lying on the floor. The view from above that his work touches is later brought in connection with the view from an airplane high above the earth. In 1950, Francis went to "Old Europe" - to Paris - where he was introduced to the radical later works of Henri Matisse, though it was Claude Monet's water lily paintings, the "Nymphéas" that were the most important to him - these powerful, still austere, figurative color compositions from the nearly blind painter from Giverny.

Is the "Wende", or the German reunification of 1989, a "zero hour" of our time equal to the "zero hour" of 1945? Maybe more than we have been ready to admit until now. In any case, art is forever manifesting the need to reflect only on itself, and its long tradition - surely stretching all the back to the cave paintings at Lascaux - cannot be completely erased. Christian Awe's paintings, which at first seem so "now", but are not so much when seen side-by-side with one of Modernism's greats, show once again what painting can do when restricted only to itself.