ALMINE RECH

Günther Förg
To London! A selection of Paintings

Jun 4 — Jul 25, 2015 | London, Savile Row

Günther Förg: Untitled Abstractions

Günther Förg was in his early mid-fifties when, in 2006 and 2007, he painted a small series of large-format, untitled works that can be said to be part of his so-called Grid Paintings (*Gitterbilder*) in the wider sense. Like other artists before him, Förg had gone through various creative phases in which he had produced expansive cycles of conceptually related works. These cycles partly overlap, which complicates the task of categorising his work into clearly distinct time periods, but doesn't much get in the way of attributing individual works to their overarching reference systems. Förg's first Lead Painting, for instance, is generally dated to 1984, although the artist is documented to have begun creating colour divisions on the dense surface of the lead with monochrome acrylic paint as soon as 1976, when he was still living in Munich. Förg made Lead Paintings well into the early 2000s, but it was only in the timeframe between 1984 and 1992 that he did so many of them.

The Lead Paintings, not least because they are so accessible and mark Förg's breakthrough in the USA, are the best example of this resolute decision in favour of declination, which characterised both the earlier series of monochrome paintings and, particularly, the subsequent series of Grid Paintings in all their nuances and formats. A stoical, pragmatic and sometimes even playful inflecion of their own motifs and formal premises manifests itself in all the previously mentioned series, always with the aim to formulate not only a unique alphabet but also, deriving from it, a unique vocabulary and grammar – a grammar of matte, muted colours oscillating between green, brown, black and blue.

The six large-format untitled Grid Paintings in acrylic on canvas that can be seen at Almine Rech Gallery in London confirm this observation – and not only that.. They were preceded by paintings in which Förg played through declinations of webs, window frames, grids and screens. These were abstract paintings, but contrary to the earlier monochrome and Lead Paintings, they expanded to include an expressive, poetic touch.

The six paintings presented at Almine Rech Gallery do not only draw on Förg's characteristic muted or shaded palette – the previously mentioned shades of green, brown, black and blue. Notwithstanding their size and the dimensions of the individual strokes, they are very free and simultaneously retain a kind of openness. The white primer on the canvas remains visible as light or a glow – and, conversely, this is even true for the odd one out in the series, in which the maze of blue, green and brown grids has all but swallowed the white primer. A recurring aspect in Förg's work is its distinct physicality. In this sense, the paintings from 2006 and 2007 are plays with light resulting from the application of the paint. The paint makes the light. And the light in the paintings modulates the colour from green to red to brown to blue to black. Spectators inevitably wonder: horizon, or figure, or window? But at the same time: Is this even relevant in terms of the painting?

Förg painted these works in Switzerland. They are based on a small watercolour by Paul Klee from the 1930s, which Förg, in an act of painting about painting, has blown up to monumental size.

Förg, was someone who engaged obsessively with the pictorial practice and paintings of his predecessors and pre-predecessors – from Edvard Munch, Piet Mondrian and Paul Klee to Barnett Newman, Blinky Palermo and the material declinations of Robert Ryman.

Förg, it appears, was not interested in a conceptual examination of the origins of abstraction, but in composition. When he was painting the Klee abstractions, he could look back on four decades of a steady work routine in terms of understanding space, dividing the picture plane, and his own theory of proportion. In this sense the acrylic paintings are a variation of a variation, a renewed radicalisation of his own work, a game of deception.

I should add that in the case of Förg's abstractions, as for instance in his Grid Paintings, there comes a certain point where it seems irrelevant whether they refer to facades, landscapes, window frames or other existing models. All of his early works – in other words the first two decades – were impregnated by the fact that the physicality of the work material was the focal point of the declinations. In Förg's case, this denoted the physical materiality of colour in combination with the physical materiality – lead, wood, copper, muslin or cotton duck – of the support. As a whole they *made an impact*. And because the idea of declination implies that no individual painting can make an impact on its own, only their common existence as a presumably endless series can create the polyphony of expression inherent in Förg's work at all stages.

The gradual variations in the Grid Paintings, which with every growth ring become more dense or open, more colourful or colourless, more structured or freer, are strongly reminiscent of Bob Dylan's approach in his later work, when during his so-called Never Ending Tour, which started in summer 1988, he tried to sidestep the expectations of his fans and critics by making music on music. Not only did he perform unrecognisably abstract renditions of popular tunes and cross-generational songs, but digging into a self-made treasure chest of modular elements, he seized this equally productive and taxing Never Ending Odyssey as an opportunity to erratically or thoughtfully rearrange the ingredients of the show. Same but different: each night anew, never giving up, constantly challenging himself and his audiences.

In an essay on Förg's work from 1996 Max Wechsler pointedly noted: 'Everything seems more or less clearly to derive from something, everything seems to claim that artistic work should fundamentally also be understood as a continuous, commenting reaction on existing pictorial works – including, naturally, one's own.'* While Dylan in his late years with his late music on music initially prompted incredulity and perplexity, before he inspired new insights and transformed the threat of stagnation through an essentially physical act of will into uncharted territory, the same can also be said of the late Förg. He too was not so much confined as inspired by his grids. He produced continuously without ever repeating himself. Instead of lamenting the end of history or modernity, instead of racking his brains, he managed thanks to the ceaseless variations of his Grid Paintings to retain an innocence that is hard to come by in the art world. As though he had been strolling past modernity, day by day, year after year, rather than letting himself be distracted by the discourses that demanded progress from modernity.

While in hindsight Förg's early alphabet may seem limited – which doesn't lessen its effect in the least – the late vocabulary he was able to summon in his Grid Paintings is tremendously diverse and resonating with mysterious dialects, which he used confidently however.

Besides the large acrylic paintings the exhibition in London also features six small-format untitled watercolours. It is taken for granted that artists generally work their way from the small sketch – be it a watercolour – towards the large painting. With Förg, however, it was the exact opposite. The small formats were afterthoughts, ramifications of the big statements. As with a reprise, what has just been completed is here reproduced, possibly also verified, in a smaller format.

In this sense, Förg, with his mini-series that invokes Klee, confirms that he was also one of the great transformation artists of his time. A year and a half after his death from a severe illness – on 5 December 2013, the day of his 61st birthday – large retrospectives of his work are scheduled at Deichtorhallen in Hamburg, Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam and in the USA. Even if one of those exhibitions were to focus exclusively on the Grid or Stroke Paintings of the 1990s and 2000s, the effect would likely be similar to that of a museum retrospective which, predictably, would survey all creative phases of his oeuvre. Indeed, such is the variety of expressions in his Grid Paintings that his ability to reinvent himself is evidenced by the macroscopic as well as microscopic perspective. Because everything, the entire expressive potential of painting, is contained in these grids: The rigour of geometry and the expressivity of gesture; the cohesion of the composition as opposed to the coherence of the content; hermetic closure and seemingly open grids form a universal vocabulary that leaves spectators speechless. This assessment can easily be extended to his characteristic palette and brushstrokes – in Förg's work, repetition and the disruption of repetition are siblings.

It almost seems as if Förg had monitored with genuine empathy all the attempts to represent the world as an abstraction made by painters in the early twentieth century. But nothing in his work suggests that he appropriated their findings to gain undue advantage.

Max Dax

* Max Wechsler, 'Ein komplexes Schau-spiel, inszeniert auch im Detail: Zur Kunst von Günther Förg' (A Complex Spactacle, Staged with Careful Attention to Detail: An Essay on the Art of Günther Förg), in *Günther Förg*, exh. cat, (Hannover: Kunstverein Hannover, 1996)