

GALERIA HEINRICH EHRHARDT

Will ich nichts verpassen, schließe ich die Augen

Jan Zöllner

From January 22nd to March 26th 2022

'Everyone recognises', Pliny the Elder claimed, 'that the origins of drawing are found in the outlining of a man's shadow'. Indeed, Pliny alludes to this same myth to speak of the origins of the visual arts in general: 'The first [relief] work of this type was made in clay by Butades of Sicyon in Corinth, working over an idea of his daughter: in love with a young man who was about to leave the city, the girl had marked the outline of her lover's profile on the wall by candlelight'. According to Pliny, then, the original act of representation was primitive insofar as the pictorial image emerged not from observation of the human body but from the defining of a projection of its shadow. The first painting as the image of a shadow, as it were.

As in this myth, everything in Jan Zöllner's work is part of an uncertain, mysterious, nocturnal narrative, the meaning of which we can only guess at. As a representation of the shadow and the image as a 'memory', the true function of painting would be to recover presence of that which is absent.

If I don't want to miss anything, I close my eyes (*Will ich nichts verpassen, schließe ich die Augen*) is the title of Zöllner's first exhibition at Galeria Heinrich Ehrhardt and also a reference to the very thing which seems to bring about, in the form of an inscription on a windowpane, the character in one of his paintings. In a deliberately confused sense of inside and out, the painting contains an 'absent' world, the world of incantation, where, in the shadows and in sleep, things are made to happen by closing one's eyes. This seems to be what Georges Bataille referred to as the 'mutation that made painting a changed reality'.

Zöllner seeks in the night, in hesitation, in dreams and in humour a way of approaching the world. Amid a certain theatrical inebriation and an irony bordering on indifference, his painting contains a succession of anti-heroic scenes that allude to the original function of painting through a dual painterly and pictorial interpretation: the sculptural nature of his painting and the characters carrying primitive tools that symbolise the very idea of making not only a representation, but a confirmation of the 'making' of the painting itself. With fluid precision and a penchant for the geometric in relation to the general conception of the painting, while paying close attention to the details that determine that same composition, the hieratic nature of the characters, the archaic quality, the frontality, the break with the conventions of perspective and the absence of any foreshortening give rise to a wondrously prosaic awkwardness. What is seen, what is 'painted', emerges from the visual as something cognitive; a 'scopic' and platonic impulse that anticipates, represents and symbolises the desire for knowledge.

Predominant in much of the work that Jan Zöllner has developed over recent years are the blacks of the charcoal, their nuances, glazes, rubbings, intensities and pressures, as well as the chiaroscuros, suns, moons and shadows which, projected onto his contemplative, fantastical, illuminated characters, imbue his painting with the magic of the nocturnal. 'Suggestive magic', as Baudelaire put it. The painting contains movements whose transfigurations are announced through shadows, and in these shadows the subject is simultaneously offered to us and is withdrawn.

From a pictorial point of view, figures such as Picasso, who gave shadow a character completely unprecedented in the history of western painting (undoing instead of doing), Van Gogh and Paul Klee's 'Physiognomischer Blitz' (1927), for example, are precursors of a conception we find in Zöllner. From a filmic point of view, in terms of the shadow's 'projection', we cannot fail to notice some of the more famous images of expressionist cinema, certain frames from *Nosferatu* or *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* which defined a new aesthetic of the shadow.

Zöllner's paintings seem to be constructed from images which are fragmented, superimposed and discontinuous, but which nonetheless propose a floating, fluid world.

Pieces and figures in balance, trousers, legs, shoes, birds, scrawled backgrounds, allusions to a poetic or a set of images that barge in over one another, delimiting a world which is 'collected' in the painting but continues beyond it. Proust spoke of the image of 'slippage', of the passage from one world to another. What are these figures doing, these legs fleeing from the paintings? Where are they going? Some scenes take place in woods, others in dark nights illuminated by powerful spotlights; others take place in rain and puddles, with characters frolicking over the ground, delighting in their senses. There are some 'constructivist' compositions and others which are more 'futurist', dreamlike, in which rituals and dances take place around smoky bonfires, and in which smokers, in their serene contemplation of the firmament, offer the indifferent, ambiguous gesture of the dandy between the ties and patent leather boots Baudelaire referred to when speaking of the painter of modern life, and the more indolent and phlegmatic poses of Lou Reed in the 70s.

On Manet, Bataille reflected on the 'kinship of paintings across all times'. A beautiful sentiment which raises an enormous web of connections and encounters, both unsuspected and utopian, which ultimately articulate a history or general vision of painting that allows us to establish a fantastic (and sometimes fanciful) framework of thought. Zöllner's painting forms part of a certain tradition of German painting, no doubt, but also, in the sense of Bataille, of painting across all times and places. At times he does this through an unconscious approach which shapes his painting through his visual baggage and peculiar dreamlike and industrial imaginary. At other times it is on the basis of more or less obvious references to the painting of predecessors such as Günther Förg and Clyfford Still, for example, but also R.B. Kitaj and Martin Kippenberger... and in the distance the painting of Attic pottery, with its red and black figures. The first two emerge as 'strangers' in Zöllner's figuration, examples formally removed from his universe. The others, meanwhile, are related through the 'intellectual': Kitaj is invoked through critical approaches brimming with notes, texts, commentaries and prefaces; while in Kippenberger, in whom the formal is perhaps circumstantial, we find multiple thematic and pictorial discoveries, most notably in the paintings of 1982 and 1983 which 'reappear' in Zöllner's recent work. Within this notion of temporal displacement gliding through the history of painting lies the fantasy of the appearance and disappearance of themes, characters and elements that can be seen in one painting after another, traversing schools, styles and centuries.

Jan Zöllner's work is packed with questions that build up to the construction of a scene, conceived not only from figuration but also from the individual patch which suddenly acquires literal meaning through its formal autonomy.

Yet these enquiries and transformations are oblique, facilitating a dual level of interpretation: that of a rapid vision from which the painting is 'understood' as a representation of a scene, in terms of a theme; and another of a gaze lost in a multitude of pictorial nuances, in an absorbing sensory richness. In a style with echoes of punk and moving away from the morass of old-fashioned pomposity, Zöllner's remarkable painting, as the inscription on one of his canvases signals, is a desire for the joy of existence.