

# GALERIE NÄCHST ST. STEPHAN ROSEMARIE SCHWARZWÄLDER

HELMUT FEDERLE

*Acknowledgement*

11 FEB – 25 MAR 2023

Opening: Saturday, February 11, 2023, 2 – 5 p.m.  
Introduction at 2:30 p.m. by Jeremy Lewison

## In the beginning. Helmut Federle's recent paintings

Citing the composer Robert Schumann, Wassily Kandinsky affirmed that the purpose of art was “to send light into the darkness of men’s hearts”.<sup>1</sup> But what can that really mean with reference to painting? Is painting uplifting? Not always. Is it spiritual? Well, it can be interpreted that way but it is a matter of opinion. Is humankind’s condition essentially dark only to be relieved by the balm of culture? Are we predisposed to melancholy? Does darkness represent ignorance and light knowledge? Kandinsky’s words provoke so many questions.

To send light into the darkness of men’s hearts is to act as God, for God created light. The creation of light was the first creative act after the formation of the heavens and the earth. בְּרֵאשִׁית [bereshit], literally in the beginning, the Hebrew word for Genesis. And God saw that it “was good”, a force for goodness, and so “God separated the light from the darkness.” The creation of light and all that followed was an iterative process, one of execution, assessment, and consequential action. It was an artistic act.

There is something of this idea of a beginning in Helmut Federle’s recent small paintings. They represent a coming into being, a formation, or a coming to form, a coalescence of marks that suggest the potential of something rather than an arrival at a finished product. Or maybe they suggest the disintegration of form, its breakdown, an ending. Applying paint with rags, washing it off if it does not satisfy him, allowing the water to do the work, leaving the ghosts of failure to mingle with what remains. In these works there is a separation of dark from light, not so much a contest between them but an evolving situation, a continuous transformation. As Maurice Merleau-Ponty writes of Cézanne in “Cézanne’s Doubt”: “He wanted to depict matter as it takes on form, the birth of order through spontaneous organization.”<sup>2</sup>

The paintings are distinctly different from such earlier series as *Edelweiss* or the *Basics on Composition* with their precise, definitive shapes and solid colours. The certainties of these paintings are now replaced by doubt, by a groping for something in the dark, for meaning perhaps, or poetry, something implied by a mark, by the application of paint or its removal, the creation of an image or its effacement, the translation of an experience, a thought or a feeling into paint. If these paintings look back to painting of the 1950s, to Jackson Pollock, or Henri Michaux, in terms of their reliance on the instinctive, on a certain Zen appearance, they also were seeded in Federle’s own earlier work stretching right back to the late 1950s; a childhood work on paper depicting mountains from around 1958, abstract images of the 1970s, paintings of the primordial like *Innerlight (HRI)* 1985 and *Gullfoss (The Death)* 1984 that have a strong sense of the numinous, or revelation. It is in that direction I think Federle is travelling. Towards understanding, if not revelation, seeing and feeling. These are not paintings of the sublime, but intimate ruminations, perhaps on mortality, on endings, of gradual disintegration, of partial memories that surge into the mind and as quickly disappear before they can be fully apprehended. The paintings do not arrive fully formed, their meaning is not preconceived but comes in the making. They derive from a place of not knowing.

---

<sup>1</sup> Kandinsky, *Über das Geistige in der Kunst. Insbesondere in der Malerei*. Munich: Piper, 1912, Einleitung, p. 7; cf. Robert Schumann, *Gesammelte Schriften über Musik und Musiker*. Leipzig, 1854, Vol. IV, p. 278, translated by M. T. H. Sadler and published in 1914 under the title *The Art of Spiritual Harmony*.

<sup>2</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “Le doute de Cézanne” (1945), in: *Sens et non-sens*, Paris 1964, p. 20.

As Merleau-Ponty wrote: “the artist launches his work just as a man once launched the first word, not knowing whether it will be anything more than a shout”.<sup>3</sup> The painter reveals what is hidden, allowing it to vibrate and resonate in the world, hoping to shine light upon it.

Federle has called the exhibition “Acknowledgement”. But what is he acknowledging? Perhaps mortality, the difficult search for meaning in art as in life, the price paid in single-minded pursuit of goals, the contradictions implicit in his multivalent approach, or acknowledgement of his binary roots in American painting and Oriental culture. It is what Umberto Eco called *opera aperta* (open work).

Jeremy Lewison

**Helmut Federle** was born 1944 in Solothurn, Switzerland; lives and works in Vienna, Austria and Italy. 1999–2007 Professor at the Academy of fine Arts, Düsseldorf, Germany. He represented Switzerland at the 47th Venice Biennale in 1997. Helmut Federle was awarded the Ricola Prize (2016) and the Prix Aurelie Nemours (2008).

Selected solo exhibitions: Musée d'Art Moderne de Paris (April to September 2023); Kunstmuseum Basel/Neubau (2019); Calouste Gulbenkian Museum, Lisbon (2017); M–Arco, Marseille (2016); Kunstmuseum Luzern, Lucerne (2012/2013); Fundación Bancaja, Valencia (2012); Rudolf Steiner Archiv / Haus Duldeck, Dornach (2005); Musée des Beaux-Arts de Nantes (2002); Kunsthaus Bregenz (1999); IVAM Centre Julio González, Valencia (1998); Aargauer Kunsthaus, Aarau (1998); Staatliche Kunsthalle, Karlsruhe (1998); Kunstmuseum Bonn (1995); Galerie national du Jeu de Paume, Paris (1995); Kunsthalle Zürich, Zurich (1992); Moderna Museet Stockholm (1992); Friedericianum, Kassel (1992); and Secession, Vienna (1991).

Selected museum and private collections: Tate Modern, London; Kunstmuseum Basel; Musée National d'art Moderne, Centre Pompidou, Paris; Kunsthaus Zürich, Zurich; Kunstmuseum Bonn; Moderna Museet, Stockholm; Kunstmuseum Luzern, Lucerne; Sammlung Goetz, Munich; Musée d'Art Moderne de Paris; Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh; Jorge M. and Darlene Pérez Collection, Miami; Sammlung Ludwig, Aachen; Sammlung Gaby und Wilhelm Schürmann, Herzogenrath; Kunsthalle Nürnberg; Reina Sofía, Madrid; ZKM Zentrum für Kunst und Medientechnologie, Karlsruhe; Fonds M–Arco, Marseille; and Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, Humlebæk.

**Jeremy Lewison** is an independent curator and art consultant based in London. He began his career as Director of Kettle's Yard Cambridge, before moving to the Tate Gallery where he eventually became Director of Collections. After eighteen years at the Tate he left in 2002 to work independently. He has organised many exhibitions over the years including retrospectives of prints by Brice Marden and Sol LeWitt, a Ben Nicholson retrospective, two major surveys of the paintings of Alice Neel and a survey of her drawings, the *Turner Monet Twombly: Later Paintings* exhibition, and most recently a Helene Schjerfbeck retrospective. He has published books and articles on modern and contemporary art including an essay for the recent exhibition of Helmut Federle's paintings held at Kunstmuseum Basel. Among his books are those devoted to Henry Moore, Jackson Pollock and Barnett Newman as well as a catalogue raisonné of the prints of Brice Marden. His most recent essay was included in the catalogue of *The Shape of Freedom: International Abstraction after 1945*, an exhibition held at the Barberini Museum, Potsdam, travelling to Albertina Modern, Vienna and Munch Museum Oslo. He was advisor to the estate of Alice Neel for sixteen years and now is the consultant to the estate of the American artist, Paul Georges. He has also been an advisor to the Kadist Foundation since 2003.

---

<sup>3</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “Le doute de Cézanne”, p. 26.