

“Nature in the Abstract”

Nadine Poulain’s visual worlds

“Nature in the Abstract”¹ wrote Joshua Reynolds in the third of his “Discourses” on the art of the “Grand Style”, in the sense that the appearance of nature should be condensed into “abstract ideas”, since the artist’s duty was to portray “nature in the abstract”. Reynolds drew on the theory developed by Locke in his “An Essay Concerning Human Understanding” of 1690 on the acquisition of abstract ideas via the empiricism of the senses, which referred to a conception of artistic creation as an abstraction from nature.

The artistic works of Nadine Poulain can indeed be located within this tradition of art theory. In spite of all the differentiation and diversity among the individual works, at their core they are united by one element: The procedure of abstraction, as an artistic production process just as much as a moment that generates meaning, such as the films *360°* and *Prelude*, both from 2010, impressively demonstrate. As in a fade, the images in the filmic movement dissolve into one another, like layers that shift over and against one another. It is precisely in this manner that Nadine Poulain achieves an oscillation of the motifs, moving from representation to abstraction, as well as a change in artistic genre, which is not obliged to choose one medium but whose characteristic is exactly that of being able to settle somewhere between painting, sculpture, and film, in order to work with layers of colour and space in the film material itself. Linearity, the most distinctive characteristic of the medium film, is thus augmented by a sense of perspective, which is to be found completely in the construction of the film layers based –technically – on the blue screen technique. Abstraction and visual medial consciousness are thus closely attached to one another, for the abstract image represents a *tertium comparationis* between representation and non-representation, since it transcends this differentiation. By depicting something the abstract picture also always depicts itself, or rather the conditions of its creation, and therefore refers to the production of the image itself.

While abstraction initially refers to the represented facticity in Nadine Poulain’s oeuvre, in the

¹ Joshua Reynolds: Discourse III (14. 12. 1770), in: Reynolds, *The Works*, ed. by E. Malone, Vol. I (London 1797), p. 43.

following it will be expanded to the area of the image's effect, presenting a conception for the sensory experience of reality. The orientation towards abstract form marks an aesthetic state capable of incorporating a theory of the sensory, with which it – in contrast to distanced, cool, geometric abstraction – is concerned with the single, unrepeatable gesture of a subjective perception.

This also applies to artworks that focus on the – human – body and explore its visibility and representationality. Works such as *Rome by Night* from 2008, for example, deal with the rendering of bodily forms in lines and details, in order to open up their own visual space for them. Attention is dedicated to contingencies and the tiniest deviations in this visual space, just as to the fleeting and microscopic. A concentration on what was invisible to the eye until now occurs, so that room is provided for a space of imagining which was previously inconceivable, since it makes the heretofore non-visible visible; a game therefore, with the limits of visibility. To the extent that the primacy of visibility, namely the depicting of a concrete, readable state, is pushed back in favour of the representation of fleetingness, which is provided with the possibility of becoming visible. This principle of variability and contingency is worked out in film images, because the insufficiencies and particularities of the living can be condensed here: In a work such as *Between you & and you and me & me*, a series of animated photographs created in 2005, the imaginary of expression is addressed, expression understood as a type of Morse alphabet of physical movement, rendered in the energy of movement. The emphasis on “expressions” as subliminally-acting graphemes means that a figurative symbol is not anymore at the centre, but rather the turnaround from a naturalistic depiction towards abstraction; namely, towards the abstract depiction of an expression in movement just as much as the representation of an image in itself in movement. In this manner a naturalistic representation is shattered and disintegrates into its formatoms and morphemes.

All of Nadine Poulain's works depict therefore those “geysers of new visual worlds”² that Walter Benjamin long ago described as a characteristic of film, with which an “optically unconscious”³

² Walter Benjamin: Neues von Blumen [1928]. In: Walter Benjamin: Gesammelte Schriften. Vol. III, ed. by Hella Tiedmann Bartels. Frankfurt/Main 1972, p. 151-153, here p. 152.

³ Walter Benjamin: Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit (Zweite Fassung) [1936]. In: Walter Benjamin: Gesammelte Schriften. Vol. I.2. ed. by Rolf Tiedemann, Hermann Schweppenhäuser. Frankfurt/Main 1974, p. 471-508, here p. 500.

state is expressed through the medium of film and its techniques. Nadine Poulain's works can be regarded in the best sense of the tradition of abstract film, for abstraction as a medium of the transformation of visual experience finds one of its most striking forms of expression in film. The "abstract" film, also known as "absolute film", experiments with means of representation that aim to repeat the seeing process as movement – often in analogy to music – in its intrinsic, elementary form. Music and film, as the abstract artistic processes par excellence, frequently forge in Nadine Poulain's works a special union, often enough indicating to the observer a reflection on his or her own reception, own manner of perception, strengthened by the contemplative modus and the careful rhythmicisation that underlies many of her works.

This procedure of abstraction is seconded by the decisiveness in the choice of colour, which initially suggests a reduction. Consistently kept to black and white – or more precisely, variants of grey – the art works seem to consciously evade colour. Yet what is staged is, in exact counterpoint to the reduction, a type of image which already received much attention from Aby Warburg in his *Mnemosyne Atlas*: the grisaille. Painting in grey tones, that is grisaille, creates a distance to the object and thus becomes a site of contention. If one regards it as the foundation of all colours, as what constitutes colours, then grisaille is the basis of all design and thus becomes a type of memory image in the order of knowledge and of representation. In Nadine Poulain's work therefore grey is not a reduction, rather it provides the observer with the possibility of concentration, in this case of the experience of the reception of art itself.

Nadine Poulain's works ultimately culminate in one point of reference: Their goal is not to depict what something is, but rather to make something altogether visible. For perception – and seeing – are not simply constructions whose constructedness is to be recognised in order to comprehend their internal constitution. Nadine Poulain has long shown us not just the mere abstraction of the object. In the system of references between concreteness and abstraction of her art works she shows the observer not just how he or she perceives, but much more: Only through the awareness of his or her ways of seeing is the art work itself constructed in this process. An active reception therefore, in whose abstractions the observer is able to create certainty through the making visible of ways of seeing.