

# SEPTEMBER

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## Transcendence without Pathos

### Carsten Fock in conversation with Oliver Koerner von Gustorf

*How does "The Devil" differ from your earlier exhibitions?*

In previous exhibitions I already incorporated the room in the painting. The exhibition here at September is something new for me. Earlier, my individual wall paintings functioned autonomously, as distinct pictures. Now, for the first time, the entire room has become something like a meta-picture. And that made the work so difficult for me, because it's a completely different scale.

*The slogans and insignias that used to determine the basic structure of your paintings have almost completely disappeared, giving way to purely painterly or graphic gestures.*

I don't see things that way. For a long time, I used slogans and typography from politics and pop culture as a means of sidestepping or placeholders, because I needed them for the architecture of my paintings. I often defined this architecture via the terminology of the slogans, because for a long time I rejected figuration per se. I increasingly ousted writing and language from my work, but what you term "gesture" is not pure gesture. Gestures did not simply replace the terms. I repeatedly get rid of the subjective element in these "gestures," exactly as before, by destroying, deleting, or overpainting it, or by integrating it into linear or rigid formal structures. Just as certain motifs in my paintings, such as mountains, soldiers, and eagles, repeat themselves, certain gestures are repeated. There is something serial, something cipher-like about this. These German themes occupied me for a long time and come through again and again. But in my new paintings this is condensed through abstraction into something very essential. I emphasize the process and no longer adhere as much to the architecture or basic structure as I did in my earlier works, in which slogans and typographies were my point of departure. This is very liberating, but also very risky. In many respects it is a fine line, because in my painting representation and figuration are still not issues that really interest me. In painting, I can only find what I'm looking for in the process.

*Could you go into that in more detail?*

For a long time I made paintings about painting and used found images for this. Today there is still something like an initial structure, for example motifs such as "ghosts" or hooded heads, which were inspired by Palm Sunday parades in Spain, or crosses and Jesus figures motivated by the late work of Otto Dix. But these forms are freer and I depart from them much faster in the process of drawing or painting. At some point they are gone and the picture can become a picture and doesn't remain a representation.

*What are you concerned with in painting?*

A painting has to have a fundamental, inner necessity, independent of the outer world. It has to be able to exist in its own right. It has to be more than representation, more than expression; above all it has to be more. This has to emerge in the process; it's not something I can think out beforehand. But it's not a question of my personal, inner sensitivities or an expression of my feelings. That would be a complete misunderstanding. My understanding of painting is influenced by my investigation of themes that reoccur in the history of painting, be it in the work of Gustave Moreau, of the Swedish landscape painter Carl Frederik Hill, or in the late work of Otto Dix. This investigation used to lead to paintings about paintings; today it marks the beginning of paintings that I create anew.

*The Watzmann, eagles, forests, mountain crosses, soldiers: Your work seems to be laden with very German motifs. We know these motifs from Romantic landscape painting, from German Expressionism. At the same time they are rooted in the generation of German painters from the sixties, seventies, and eighties, that produced father figures, such as Baselitz and Lüpertz, whom younger generations reject, because they represent the patriarchal painter type and a very classical image of art. To some extent you refer to the same sources as they do. Isn't that problematic for you?*

I do see this problem, but perhaps from a different perspective. This has to do with my cultural context. I partially grew up in East Germany and then was resocialized in the West. On the one hand, I was bombarded with socialist realism, with art on behalf of the working class in the sense of political superstructure. On the other hand, in the West there was this supposed freedom, that you could do or express anything. The closeness I feel to certain German painters is a challenge for me, something I can't help but deal with.

*To whom do you feel such a closeness?*

To Penck, for example. Not to his standard drawings, but to the early, picked-to-pieces paintings he made. There was a fantastic exhibition at the Schirn, with a whole room full of almost surreal works that were put together. Today people would put them together on the computer. At that time Penck did this without any aids. They are very strange paintings that do not function via figuration or abstraction. They are signs from the time of the Cold War yet at the same time absolutely timeless. They are not only historically relevant, but today are simply formally good paintings. I'm interested in the German-German issue, because I grew into it, because it is the closest thing for me. At the same time, in my work there is a very intense investigation with postwar American modernism, with Barnett Newman, Ad Reinhardt, and Philip Guston. I was interested in postwar American painting even before I became interested in Polke, Baselitz, and Richter, because this kind of painting, as in Guston's early work, was very process-oriented, because it was not a question of representing or portraying something.

*For your exhibition at September you gave the room an almost sacral air. This includes both the colored areas of the wall painting and the picture of Jesus positioned centrally on a violet wall. You almost created a kind of church for painting. Some might find this belief in painting suspect, if not restorative, and one might wonder whether an artist can continue to paint that way given the history of painting. Does that bother you?*

Not at all. That's part of my development. For me, this exhibition is a coup. This Christ is not simply a Christ, but in first and foremost a picture. He is in the painting yet at the same time dissolves in it – this figure is just as much a Robin Hood or a warrior. And of course he is, like the slogans I used to use, nothing other than a model or a scaffolding that helps to construct the painting.

*But when one presents a motif like a Christian icon on a dark violet wall, then it has something to do with painterly pathos, doesn't it?*

I don't like this word "pathos" at all. I can only do things the way I do them and focus on what I like. And what I really liked was the way in which holy images were presented in Greek churches. In my work there are repeated references to this the iconographic aspect of these portrayals. Even today, when I'm in churches, I'm fascinated by the placement of the Christ portrayals. And I proceed very emotionally in my work, which includes the choice of a violet wall. To my mind, "pathos" has pejorative connotations. Although it's difficult for me to find a positive formulation for it, what I'm talking about is the point at which painting starts to become interesting. It's not just a matter of talking about something or feeling something; painting is something incredibly direct but simultaneously not immediately tangible. This may sound romantic, but I seek transcendence without pathos.

*A noble aim. (Laughs)*

It's not a goal I set myself but it emerges in the process of painting. And it also has something to do with where I paint. I created the works in this exhibition in three completely different places: in Andratx on Majorca, in Bleckede in northern Germany, and in Vienna. When I look at them I can see that I developed a very specific way of painting in these different places and in these different phases of my life – both in terms of the color and in my concentration on formal elements. In Vienna, for example, I was influenced by baroque architecture, in this sophisticated city full of old ghosts. When I arrived there I initially only made monochrome and black-and-white works. This has to do with what I feel in a city. In Vienna, I viewed a great deal of very old art, and that found expression in the works. On the other hand, for many years I didn't paint as colorfully as I did in Andratx. That had to do with the light, with the vegetation, with the proximity to the sea. In Bleckede in the wintertime, in the solitude of northern Germany, I felt only gray the whole time. You walk along a dike and the weather is good, but it feels gray. Another factor is my occupation with different artists, whom I take with me to these places. For example, the late work of Otto Dix accompanied me on these trips and led to an investigation of religion, which at the same time reflects my experiences of these places or surroundings.

*The exhibition is called "The Devil" and a portrayal of the devil is actually on view.*

The attempt to depict the devil is something which I generally find senseless. But in this painting he embodies in the truest sense the idea of driving something further in painting, of outdoing yourself. Intuitively I shied away from trying to represent him, but it simply happened during the last week of my stay in Vienna. For me, this is not a portrayal of the devil, but primarily picture that has something cruel and devilish about it.