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If Painting Stands Beside Itself

Between cats, Michael Jackson and formalism; Rochelle Feinstein's work is a discovery. Her retrospective is now on display at Lenbachhaus Munich.



"Find Your Own Damn Voice" Rochelle Feinstein 1994

How is it possible that this woman approached the age of 70 before her work became known outside of the art world?! Rochelle Feinstein's retrospective, which is currently traveling from Geneva to Munich and Hannover to her hometown New York, comes just in time, since it touches upon many questions crucial to younger artists. Her art is like an exercise in loosening up against all the idealizations of artistic practices and, at the same time, their most precise reflection possible. Feinstein's painting is funny. But it's never making fun of painting.

"I made a terrible mistake", explained Michael Jackson in 2002, after he had presented his youngest son to a cheering crowd over the balcony parapet of his suite at the Hotel Adlon – a textbook example for a loss of control between the hysterical (high voltage) poles of the private and the public. Feinstein has borrowed Jackson's apology for an installation as well as for her show's title at Lenbachhaus. The show, a compact alteration of her previous exhibition at the Centre d'Art Contemporain, is completely flawless. And yet it does nothing properly.

The Jackson-room "I Made A Terrible Mistake" works much like a floodgate, in that immediately, one frees oneself from all given expectations of a painting-exhibition and other solidifications. A fan spins on a small video monitor

placed high up on the ceiling, a disco ball spins vis-à-vis and reflects flecks of light onto paintings that themselves depict flecks of light by a disco ball. “Wrong” is written backwards on a pillow that sticks to a canvas. Expressive speech bubbles are painted over three black and white photographs that are put up on edge: “Now”, says the coast; “soon”, says the ground between a girl’s legs; “wait”, says the mountain valley. Who is speaking? “Oh baby, baby, give it up”: One canvas notes the blandishments from Barry White’s hit single “I’m Gonna Love You Just A Little More Baby” in a dense comic-font; White’s velvety voice also whispers from a video, which immerses the entire exhibition into a soupy cuddle-disco-sound. The (black) singer’s self-complacent heterosexuality encounters the hysterical-perverse stepping-beside-oneself of Jackson, and yet both find themselves lovingly protected by an all accepting laconic brevity of Feinstein’s clear head.

At the other end of the exhibition, Feinstein depicts both of her deceased cats in two varying silkscreen prints, combined with diagonal, abstract black and white stripes. Located in front of these paintings – its back turned against the pictures – is the swivel armchair that was loved by those cats. Here, the guest is allowed to take a seat and to contemplate calmly, how every work in the show springs a leak and connects with the following one. The chair is placed perfectly; and so is absolutely every single element in this show, everything is placed within perfect relation to each other by Feinstein and the curator Stephanie Weber – in such a way that it whizzes. Feinstein’s oeuvre stretches between the collectively connoted icon of the pop star to her own cats as representatives of the private, contingent life. Every gesture reflects back to the self, not in its biographical reduction but in terms of its involvement in networks and collective procedures. Receipts, tickets and city maps are part of the reprocessing of a journey throughout Europe on five canvases. In order to represent the train ride across the Alps, Feinstein navigated a leaking tube of opaque white paint over a green surface with tickets glued onto it. The last canvas shows a German flag in slightly modified colors; written on it, in gothic type letters, is four times the same question, one that Feinstein had to answer constantly: “Feinstein, is that a German name or a Jewish name?” Odd question, both of course.

It took a long time until the teacher for painting and printmaking at Yale found recognition for her unique style. In the eighties the 1947-born artist found her work to be mistakenly reduced to stylistic questions, so much so that she was willing to quit. In 1993, when she realized ‘Flag’ and glued a dishtowel onto the canvas and lengthened its grid with carelessly conducted brushstrokes, she was read as a feminist, something to which she responded in 1994 with a work titled “Find Your Own Damn Voice” (instead of working through generalizing concepts of feminism or painting). In this work, miniatures of Feinstein’s older works are taped onto the canvas in plastic pockets, much like a postcard rack, framed again by a carelessly executed modernist grid.

Modernism’s legacy with all its claims to universality is the score that Feinstein continuously interrupts with contingency. In the ongoing sampling of her own work as well as in referencing biographical incidents and collective events of popular culture, Feinstein avoids every statement that insists on insularity and instead mirrors everything that contributes to this insistence. Manifested paradigmatically in her tableau “Before And After” from 1999: Canvases of different sizes and shapes, tinted pale yellow or pale blue, simply leaning against the wall or against each other, show nothing more than the same, empty canvas – complemented by frontal views of a studio-shelf that holds completed paintings, and yet hidden from our view. The production process reflects back to itself, as its own motif. Feinstein, however, exalts a detached standard-sentence among colleagues into large sized paintings: “Love your work”, echoes one speech bubble across several canvases, too big to fit. These paintings hang slightly above the floor level, demonstrating pleasantly that Feinstein doesn’t exaggerate.

Everything about this work stands beside itself. Feinstein doesn’t work into spatial depth, meaning she doesn’t produce self-identical assertions, but into the plane, towards the sides, and shows painting at work, which does not mean: the painter at work, but: the historical dispositive of painting with all its connotations, canonizations and stereotypes. “Seeking nude model for abstract painting” reads one ad posted Craigslist that Feinstein has printed out and glued onto an assemblage, rotated by 90°. Who needs a model for an abstract painting? This work was, however, only shown for a short period of time, because Feinstein and curator Stephanie Weber made a virtue out of necessity, that is: the spatial confinements, and decided to thus alternate the presented work at this particular spot every two weeks.

Feinstein’s work is succinct and ironic, and yet it never shifts into being cynical, as it is the case with some younger colleagues like David Ostrowski from Cologne. She is more committed than Michael Krebber, carries less contentual burden than Martin Kippenberger, she is more trenchant than Mary Heilman and more nonchalant than Albert Oehlen. Feinstein’s gaze on painting is a debunking one, very much like that of an old friend who knows us so well that we cannot lead him/her on. An enormous white smudge seemed adequate as a commentary on the AIDS-crisis; a busted condom, as she explained, but at the same time, of course, abstract painting. Feinstein shows paradigmatically how one can subvert painting – and yet still let it happen.

KOLJA REICHERT