

Painting is Possible

Alois Lichtsteiner's «Mountain Paintings»

Thesis: Painting mountains is like climbing without a rope. One brushstroke too many, or in the wrong place, means loss of balance, a fall. Each of Alois Lichtsteiner's «Mountain Paintings» is a first ascent. It is as though nobody before him has seen the mountains he paints. His works extend the chapter on "Alpine Painting". His latest series of paintings calls into question and expands the expressive repertoire of painterly composition, proving that painting is possible beyond the bounds of eclecticism, collaged citation, revivalism and irony.

Series: Since the summer of 2000, Alois Lichtsteiner has been painting works with the title *Untitled (Mountain)*. As in Claude Monet's series of *Meules* and *Nymphéas*, the primary common factors in these series are obvious. Yet the comparison with Monet is not rooted in the fixation on a specific motif seen in varying atmospheric conditions, but in the fact that a group of otherwise heterogeneous pictures are recognisable as a cohesive group because of their shared handling of colour. All of them consist of white areas with grey-black patches. In these works, the hues between extremes of white and black are as varied as Monet's rendering of light, especially in the modelling of the dark "islands" within the flow of white. The wealth of nuance in both cases lies primarily in the use of oil paints, which, in contrast to acrylics, allow the creation of translucent layers. Like Monet's late *Nymphéas* or Mark Rothko's abstract colour fields, Lichtsteiner's black-grey-white *Mountain Paintings* evoke the impression of light emanating from within the depths of the picture and transforming the surface into a colour space. These common factors are of the essence. In terms of atmosphere, on the other hand, there could hardly be a greater contrast between Monet's organic lyricism, Rothko's warm fluidity and Lichtsteiner's crystalline coldness.

There are differences, too, in Lichtsteiner's range of formats – from panorama-like strips as long as five metres, often in the form of a diptych, and monumental vertical formats, to cycles of oil studies on hand-made paper the size of a letter.

Mountains? The fact that we read the grey-black patches in the white areas as wintry mountain scenes, as foundlings freed by the thaw, as the sheer cliffs and combs of icy peaks, or as woods and valleys in endless deserts of snow, is the product of a subconscious automatism – in much the same way that we say 'T' when we top a vertical line with a horizontal one. Programmed by experience and cognition, the primary visual impression automatically becomes a catalyst. Just a few indicators are enough for us to see what we have stored in our memory. The grey patches in the brilliant white of Lichtsteiner's pictures and the brackets in the title *Untitled (Mountain)* suffice as points of reference, answering the question as to subject matter. The fact that Lichtsteiner, both in his comprehensive series of predominantly large-scale canvases and in his oil studies and canvases, repeatedly varies the same abstract pattern, is a strategy of conceptual objectives.

Mechanisms of perception: with regard to content, Lichtsteiner is as much a minimalist as Monet with his *Haystacks* or Paul Cézanne with his *Montagne Sainte-Victoire*. The same external phenomenon is enough to trigger a profound study. Each picture in the series makes new statements about the underlying question raised by the motif itself. While Monet, with his *Haystacks*, addresses the issue of constantly

changing appearance, and Cézanne, in his rendering of a momentary state, explores the laws of nature, Lichtsteiner, in turn, seeks fundamental structures of visual order only to call them into question at the next step. His *Mountain Paintings* are neither image nor abstraction. What we see is specific. Like Cézanne, Lichtsteiner transposes the cognition triggered by a single motif into a visual “harmony parallel to nature”.(1)

Beyond the motif: The black-grey patches we so rashly interpret as foundlings freed by the thaw, as sheer cliffs, or as woodland, act as specific points of orientation in the picture. The painter is by no means aiming to render the material properties of stone. Spectators seeking more information on the fields of snow or topographical landmarks are left to their own devices, confronted only with a white “void” in which the grey floats like ice-floes. Lichtsteiner goes beyond the form of his mountain motifs just as Monet goes beyond the oval of the haystack or Cézanne beyond the irregular pyramid of the Montagne Sainte-Victoire. Like these two artists before him, Lichtsteiner takes the motif only as the starting point from which to develop a higher visual harmony. Another point of reference is the work of Georg Baselitz, whose detachment from his subject matter is achieved by turning it upside-down. For Baselitz, the motif is the spark that ignites the artist’s emotive energies in order to give expression to gestures of elementary states of being.

The meaning of the mountains: Some twenty years ago, Lichtsteiner summarised his relationship to the external reality of his motifs in the series *The Content of Vessels*. In his 1984 *The Content of Vessels* (p.9), which is an unusually large work for a still life, we perceive the subtle indication of a dish tipped at an angle, from which a blue stream of colour is flowing. The same blue that is flowing from the vessel already imbues the space around the focal point of the picture. Stephan Berg interpreted this version of Lichtsteiner’s *Colour Dish* as an indication that “the presence of colour is the sole theme of this picture, which would mean that the vessel is to be read as a metaphor for the canvas”.(2) In *The Content of Vessels*, the form of the dish dissolves as the colour pours out of it, so that the colour itself gains absolute autonomy. Ulrich Loock interprets Lichtsteiner’s current works – the *Mountain Paintings* series and the grey-white *Birch Trees* immediately preceding them – in similar vein when he writes: “His portrayal of the mountain, of the tree bark, do not signify these things in themselves; they mean nothing but the painting itself, bodies covered in skin”.(3) Loock’s materialistic view precludes transcendence(4) – colour freed from the object is nothing but a “skin” of colour: “Given that, for this painting, there is nothing external to itself, nothing whose reification it could be or could have been (Cézanne’s mountain), and given that there is no ‘subject matter’ in this painting, its inevitability lies in the endless repetition of itself. Picture after picture.”(5) Lichtsteiner is undoubtedly a cool spirit in search of reason. Yet his paintings – this is evident in the series not yet completed at the time of Loock’s statement – are more than a snakeskin that is shed in “endless repetition of itself”. They are rationalist in approach, but their potency does not exclude a proximity to mystical realms.

Furka: Cézanne invariably painted *sur le motif*. In each of his works, he undertakes the complex journey from the «sensations» perceived to the creation of a new visual order *parallel à la nature*(6). Unlike Cézanne, who needed nature in order to breathe, Lichtsteiner is not dependent on direct observation in his paintings and oil studies. The exploration of nature, however, is also the point of departure for his *Mountain Paintings*. This is not only because he needs a subject matter and cannot paint

without one, but also because, ultimately, in each of his works, he is looking for “rhythmic, harmonious and musical” constellations, individual details of which are conveyed in each picture.(7) For Lichtsteiner, direct contact with the landscape motif is at the very beginning, and is unique. Unlike Cézanne, who had to pass through the gateway of external reality anew each time, Lichtsteiner eradicates the recognisable landscape motif from his visual world right from the start. He takes a few photographic studies, which he does not consider as art, and extracts from them a vocabulary of basic modules which he uses in the studio as the basis on which to build ever new facets of his understanding of nature. His *Mountain Paintings* do not actually show mountains, but act instead as ciphers or symbols. Nevertheless, it is clearly evident how they have been derived from the image of nature.

Reflections – black snow: The point of departure for his *Mountain Paintings* can be found in colour photos taken from his car in June 2000 on the Furka (p. 10 and l.). The pictures shown here indicate the systematically conceptual and freely ludic approach with which Lichtsteiner has transformed the impression of nature. If we hold the photo up to the painting, there is no recognisable connection. The photo shows an early summer mountainscape: in the foreground is a hillside meadow, and beyond the hidden chasm is the broad flank of mountain where pockets of snow remain in the vertical crevices. To the lower left, in the window of the car through which the artist has taken the photo, we see part of the frame, and at the top left a tiny piece of blue sky. The picture *Untitled (Mountain)* (p. 24), on the other hand, is a flatly planar composition without foreground or background. While the vertical crevices suggest depth and the contrast of white and dark areas give the impression of a high mountain, the grey and paler areas remain, intarsia-like, entirely in the plane. Only by turning the picture upside-down does the connection become clear (p.10 and r.). Lichtsteiner, like Baselitz, has turned his motif by 180 degrees in order to paint it -- but he has gone several steps further.

First of all, he has eliminated the spatially structuring elements of the foreground (the meadow sloping down to the chasm) and the background (sky). This process of abstraction continues with his reduction of tonality to grey-white contrasts. The final step in creating a sense of detachment from the impression of nature is his inversion of the dark and light tones. The areas of snow on the photo now correspond to the grey-black patches, turned 180 degrees. A close comparison shows that the artist has retained the boundaries of these fields with almost slavish precision.

Finding and drawing forms: Alois Lichtsteiner is an artist who not only paints and draws. Before he paints, and while he is painting, he goes through a rigorous thought process. His approach is a conceptual one, in which the act of painting itself is merely the final stage – albeit a complex one – in a long process. Preparing for painting involves developing his own artistic syntax of the portrayal of nature, through abstraction and concretion, whereby new images of nature can be realised. The initial products of this compositional approach are sketchy outlines based on photographs and a plethora of small oil sketches and collaged studies (p. 11, r.). He no longer looks to the sublime landscape of the Furka mountains, but, rather in the manner of a Chinese calligrapher, writes grey-hued forms on beige paper, which might be read in many ways -- as fields of snow or rock formations – or tears out scraps of newspaper images that might signify snow. The flood of sketches created in this way is an indication of the whimsicality and ease with which this artist is able to find ever new visual possibilities (p. 10 and 11, top). In this experimental phase, it is important that the individual page does not represent a boundary of any kind. A composition can

continue on the next page and can unite further parts to create a whole, for the individual page is always merely a detail extracted from a broader manuscript.

Additive painting: Lichtsteiner's studio in Murten is a soberly ascetic room in a former garage. The windows are whited out. Lichtsteiner does not place his paintings on an easel, but hangs the empty canvases on the wall so that he can always check the emerging image from a distance. He transfers onto the white canvas the outlines of a sketch he considers worth executing. This forms the compositional starting point. Lichtsteiner is not an artist for whom painting signifies purely the act of painting as such. Like Cézanne, he seeks as he paints – *je cherche en peignant*.⁽⁸⁾ In conversation, Lichtsteiner describes his work on the picture, the actual process of painting, as “adding on” (*Dazufügung*). This is the phase that follows on from the preparatory work based on the photograph. Lichtsteiner is an impassioned painter who knows that oil paints bring their own laws into play, having a specific material quality through which the energy of the artist is manifested, possessing the power to absorb light or let it shine through, and being capable of merging with other colours. Lichtsteiner's use of paint involves more than just handling of colour. The paint itself, to him, is as much a medium through which he can allow his personal energies and emotions to flow into the picture as it is an absolutely autonomous means of artistic expression that he allows to take on its own immediacy and elementary form, free of all coding and prejudice. The composition is the “vessel” in which paint and colour can develop their impact. In other words: drawing is the instrument and paint the tonality it produces.

Tonality: Lichtsteiner often works on a painting for months until it has taken on its “tonality” -- completion, for him, being the achievement of a balance between the “rhythm and repetition” of certain visual elements in a form he describes as “musicality”. When he begins, he exploits the full potential of the paint to create the state of balance inherent in the composition. He is by no means aiming merely to reproduce the outward forms of nature. As he puts it, “I do not know whether I have painted a certain landscape or, for instance, trees.”⁽⁹⁾ Unlike Baselitz' upside-down figures, Lichtsteiner's formal painterly disposition, derived from a landscape photograph, is a neutral gridwork comparable to the horizontal structures developed by Rothko in his colour fields.

Slow painting: How does Lichtsteiner paint? First of all, he prepares his colours: the very pale -- but by no means cold -- zinc-titanium white, and three hues of grey (light, medium and dark) blended from white and ivory black. Then he applies grey, which according to Lichtsteiner, is “the most difficult colour of all for any artist”, followed by white, which he uses to surround the grey, encircling it and partly overlapping it at the edges. The process sounds simple enough, and the laconic potency of the finished painting might easily give the impression that everything has been cast onto the canvas in a frenzied ecstasy of inspiration. Yet that is not at all what Lichtsteiner is about, for he is neither a creative powerhouse like Jackson Pollock nor, at the other end of the gesturally expressive spectrum, a magisterial virtuoso like Georges Mathieu. In fact, he is a slow painter like Cézanne: each new brushstroke is another word added to a poem, and has to fit in with the rhythm of what is already there while bringing the work one step closer to completion.

The brushstroke: Each individual brushstroke – the artist uses brushes that allow traces to be made several centimetres wide – is clearly set. The marks made by the

bristles of the brush retain their direction with clarity, even in monochrome white. Neither white nor grey ever appear in his work as smooth areas. The gestural expression of the brushstrokes and the clarity of their direction lend the surface of the painting a sense of motion redolent of the ripples on a lake. The overall impression is one of a signature in which, even if the painter employs it as a deliberate means of generating a certain atmosphere, there is an element of subjective determinance that would be described in music as slow, emotive, vibrant or wild.

Colour and space: Apart from the brushwork, which structures the picture plane and creates a sense of atmosphere independently of colour, the picture, which is invariably only an excerpt of a larger whole, is further determined by colour and form. By using only the two non-colours, the artist is forced to achieve an almost excessive distinction between light and dark, black and white, as in engraving or drawing. The areas around the grey-black patches are particularly noteworthy. The white flows around them like water lapping at a cliff, so that the black shimmers through the white, like ocean spray over grey islands. White and black bear an ambivalent relationship to one another. Depending on the thickness with which the paint is applied, on the direction of the brushstroke, and on the layering of different hues, the white takes on a different materiality. White that absorbs light like freshly fallen snow is juxtaposed with white that reflects light like a patch of ice. Within the tense polarity of positive and negative, depending on the angle of light and the position of the viewer, different hues and shades push to the fore. At times the black seems like a “hole” or a “gate” in the flat whiteness, and at other times it pushes through to the forefront, taking on a spatial density that overshadows the hovering immateriality of the white.

Groups: According to an unpublished catalogue raisonné of his paintings, the artist has so far created about a hundred large *Mountain Paintings*, some of them in diptych form. This major series of *Mountain Paintings* can be sub-divided into groups, clearly indicating the analytical approach the artist takes to his subject matter in order to subject it to constant variation. His approach can perhaps best be compared with that of the late Monet, whose vast, almost panoramic, paintings of waterlilies more or less abandoned the figurative in a systematic exploration of the motif from ever changing viewpoints. It is undoubtedly true, as Ulrich Loock has shown, that Lichtsteiner's painting pursues distinctly auto-referential objectives,⁽¹⁰⁾ that the contrast between black-grey and white, the brushwork, and the rhythm and structuring of the plane all involve a new approach to the fundamental issues of painting and the way it is perceived. However, in a broader sense, it is also evident that the mountain is not merely the subject matter of the painting, but that the artist has undertaken a systematic analysis of the motif. In other words, he is interested in both aspects – in painting as painting (*peinture pure*) and in conveying a far deeper exploration of the motif itself that addresses its underlying content. Moreover, as the entire cosmos of the hundred or so motivally and atmospherically related *Mountain Paintings* shows, this form of painting, with its diffusion of light, opens up magical spheres without ever dictating a specific content.

The Lucerne exhibition *Alois Lichtsteiner: Birken und ein Berg* in the summer of 2001 clearly displayed a fluid transition from the *Birch Trees* to the *Mountains* (cf. p. 14). This development runs from a conceptual focus on limited landscape details to a broad and all-embracing view. Whereas, in the first instance, the view of birch bark renders a detail so condensed that the motif is unrecognisable, or recognisable only with prior knowledge of the subject matter, the later versions, by contrast, clearly

show a mountainside or an entire range of mountains. Particularly clear examples of this can be found in the illustrations on pages 25, 27, 35 and 53, which, at first glance, seem to show a valley or mountain range. *Untitled (Mountain)*, 2001 (p. 25), and *Untitled (Mountain)*, 2001 (p. 27) are exceptions: the former features a horizontal *repoussoir* element at the lower right which generates a spatial development of the background landscape in the manner of the Furka photo, while the latter features a radiantly blue sky over a panoramic “world landscape”. Developing an “abstract” detail of the *Birch Tree* paintings into a “figurative” panorama of the mountains involves a transition from orthogonally arranged structural fields to an organic and freely developing visual order.

The Mountain Paintings within the oeuvre: This development also marks a general turning-point in Lichtsteiner’s oeuvre. Until this point, his painterly studies had been based on an object that was small in relation to the picture format – a knee, a foot, a knife, a vessel, a drawer front. These everyday objects rendered in a small scale in relation to the overall area of the picture, appearing only as flat graphic signs, allowed the artist to paint in a conceptually expressive way. In these works, he expresses the elementary spatial potency of gestural colour fields in a new way with a visual approach determined by a distinctive choice of motif. One unchanging aspect of his painterly oeuvre is his eschewal of central perspective. All these works consist of juxtaposed planar areas. The sense of space is evoked solely by the gestural structuring of the painterly hues, which allow light to permeate and radiate back again out of the depth of the painterly “body”. This transformation of certain areas of the painting into a spatiality of colour is based on dual contrasts: alongside and around the translucent areas, the artist has placed areas that completely absorb the light falling on them. Between the areas that are built up as an impenetrable “wall”, there are “windows” of diffuse spatial depth. A paradigmatic example of this polarity in the impact of colour-tone can be found in Lichtsteiner’s first *Mountain Painting*, his large-format *Untitled (Mountain)* of 1989 (p.17). There is a certain finality and fundamentality in this formula, which Lichtsteiner arrived at during his most radical phase, when he based his approach on the elementary syntax of Kasimir Malevich’s *Black Square on a White Ground*. The artist – having grown up in the Ohmstal valley of Lucerne – perceived the “mountain” as something unsettling, sharp-edged, up-and-down, to-and-fro, as something that both blocked the view and opened the mind’s eye. It seems to have been wrested into submission once and for all in this painting through the interaction of exemplary structuring. In formal terms, the picture consists of two trapezoidal elements: the dark and earthbound form of the mountain as solid as the Pyramid of Cheops; the yellow glow of vibrant energy in the cosmic form of the sky, redolent of Van Gogh. In order to preclude any “abstract” interpretation right from the start, Lichtsteiner has employed a strategy of alienation or camouflage through inversion of the motif. From a contemporary perspective, his *Untitled (Mountain)* of 1989 is not concrete, but coded and figurative. The essence of the endless heavens and the unmoveable mass of the mountain do not call the inversion into question, but lend it a magical presence. The “concrete” elements of the juxtaposed areas are not only the most succinct of symbols for the “mountain” as such, but actually convey its very essence through the materiality or immateriality, respectively, of the subtly rendered tonal values. In consistently eschewing the illusion of central perspective – the picture never pretends to be anything other than “an area covered with colours in a certain order”(11) – Lichtsteiner was also drawn to the three-dimensionality of sculpture. He created cones of clay, which he then painted in monochrome as “endless painting”.(12) Not only are they endless, but, like

Wolfgang Laib's *Pollen Mountains*(13) they cannot be climbed. In the *Mountain Paintings* series, Lichtsteiner varies and multiplies the black patch from the *Birch Tree* paintings in a way that has allowed the spatiality of his compositions to become more complex, more free and more chaotic. The tendency towards a labyrinthian network of patches generates a largely incalculable sense of space that is not alleviated in the slightest by the ambivalence of form and ground. Through the sophisticated combination of grey patches that spread out unforeseeably in the white, Lichtsteiner achieves a maximum of spatial complexity in his *Mountain Paintings* series that is as conceptual as it is sensual. All painting today, whether figurative or abstract, photorealistic or gesturally expressive, is bound to be compared with the work of Gerhard Richter. Richter's 1968 painting *Himalaya* (p. 16, l.), which is of considerable import to Lichtsteiner, is also executed in grey, black and white, and is a milestone in Alpine painting. Lichtsteiner goes one step further than Richter. Unlike Richter, Lichtsteiner does not transpose a photograph into expressive monumentality in order to prove the vitality and superiority of the structurally evaluating and sculpturally simplifying painting in a well-honed paragon, but, like a Chinese calligrapher, lets the mountains re-emerge evocatively out of the signs they create themselves (p.16 r./p.43).

(1) Paul Cézanne, „Gespräche mit Joachim Gasquet“, in *Paul Cézanne über die Kunst*, ed. Walter Hess, Mittenwald 1980, p.12.

(2) Stephan Berg, „Der Inhalt der Malerei – zu den Arbeiten Alois Lichtsteiners“, in *Alois Lichtsteiner*, exhib. cat., Kunstverein Freiburg, 1992, p. 6.

3 Ulrich Looock, „Die der Welt zugewandte Seite“, in *Alois Lichtsteiner, Birken und ein Berg*, exhib. cat., Neues Kunstmuseum Luzern, 2001, p. 10.

4 Cf.: op. cit., p. 6.

5 Op. cit., p. 10.

6 Cf. Evelyn Benesch, „Vom Unfertigen zum Unvollendeten – zur «réalisation» bei Paul Cézanne“, in *Cézanne. Vollendet – Unvollendet*, exhib. cat., Kunstforum Wien/Kunsthhaus Zürich, Ostfildern 2000, p. 41ff.

7 Alois Lichtsteiner in conversation with the author in December 2002. All other Lichtsteiner quotes are based on this conversation.

8 Evelyn Benesch (see note 6), p. 41.

9 See note 7.

10 Ulrich Looock (see note 3), p. 10.

11 Maurice Denis, *Du symbolisme au classicisme. Théories*, Paris 1964, p. 33.

12 Cf. *Kegel*, 1989, painted clay, illustrated in *Alois Lichtsteiner*, exhib. cat., Kunsthalle Bern 1992, p. 21.

13 Cf. Wolfgang Laib, „Die fünf unbesteigbaren Berge“, 1984, *Blütenstaub von Haselnuss*, illustrated in *Wolfgang Laib. Durchgang – Übergang*, exhib. cat. Institut für Auslandsbeziehungen, Stuttgart 2000, Ostfildern 2000, p. 75.