



PAINTING ON THE EDGE

"A painting is a way of directing thoughts simultaneously inward and outward."

A conversation between an artist and an art lover

Heinz Stahlhut (HS): How did this exhibition project come about, whose initiative was it, which ideas were your own?

Alois Lichtsteiner (AL): Kuno Fischer often asked me if we could do something jointly, until recently that was not possible due to my relationship to other galleries. The catalyst was the exhibition in the Lucerne Art Museum with the collection of Jacqueline and Luc Robert. Turns out that I am represented in both the Museum's collection as well Robert's.

I had the idea of a comprehensive exhibition of my works and asked Christian if he would give my work some consideration. After all, I cannot look upon myself with the same objective distance as an outsider. In addition, I wanted this exhibition with Fischer to be something different than in a usual gallery, where the emphasis is on displaying new works and the commercial aspect is in the foreground. In this case, I wanted to create the opportunity to ponder how things are to continue from here, how my work is going to lead me into the future.

Christian Cuénoud (CC): Alois asked me to join in, and without knowing what it was about, I agreed on the spot.

HS: How long have you been familiar with Alois' work?

CC: Since the late 70's or early 80's; in 1970 I moved from Lausanne to Bern. The art scene in Bern was totally different from Lausanne. The French-speaking part of Switzerland was still highly influenced by the "Ecole de Paris", whereas in German-speaking Switzerland a new generation was already in place with key figures like the curators of the Kunsthalle Bern, Harald Szeemann, Jean-Christophe Ammann and Johannes Gachnang or the gallery owner Toni Gerber. Toni Gerber introduced me to the scene in Bern, where I immediately encountered a lot of artist-painters, first and foremost Alois Lichtsteiner and Christian Lindow.

HS: Can you still remember what it was back then about Alois Lichtsteiner's work that you found so fascinating?



CC: Yes, I remember quite well, it was his power and his devotion to painting. That is why I immediately bought an important large painting that is still significant for me as the father figure for his later works. It is a painting of a brush, a head on a table and paints. It impressed me, it touched me, I had hardly ever seen such energy elsewhere.

HS: What do you make of your relationship after so many years, what sort of relationship as artist and collector do you have after all these years?

AL: We have become friends; it seems we have a similar mentality and way of thinking; literature plays a major role. I don't have any role models in painting, but I have strong role models in literature, that is something that we have always shared. French-speaking culture was also a very central theme for me.

CC: I share your opinion, back then the concept of art was more broadly applied than today. For my generation, it was a matter of belonging to something, exchanging ideas, the priority was not selling paintings. That's why the idea of a collection was foreign to me at the time; I did not regard myself as a collector, but as an art lover.

AL: Now you are getting ahead of things. All these reflections came about as a result of our discussions. I have to ask myself across the board: who was I back then, what were my reasons for doing what I did? From this process, which we are following jointly, arise completely new perceptions and insights.

HS: Can I come back to one point here, what do you consider the difference between a collector and an art lover?

CC: I believe that a collector starts out with a certain goal, he knows where he is going, and puts a lot of effort into creating a collection that matches his concept. I do things differently, I bought paintings, but considered each one individually, without any regard to the earlier works. Each painting stands on its own: there is no hierarchy. Contact to the artist is more important than the relationship to galleries and to the market. I have often come to know them personally and in some cases developed friendships. I enjoy visiting Alois' studio. I immerse myself in his work, it brings me along internally. It creates a sort of network between his work and my impressions.

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HS: Has your friendship made it easier to develop this exhibition project, can one be more critical, can one be more open for criticism, or is it in fact harder for friends?

AL: We sort of needed each other, whereby I do not just mean in the economic sense, that was not the basis of it. Christian was always very critical, he often hurt me, said things that I did not expect.

CC: This trust was more important for you than for me; since you, as an artist were sometimes unsure of yourself because you worked alone in your studio. Then you showed me these works and asked me what I thought of them.

AL: Yes, you have to bare yourself, in a sense, expose your vulnerability.

CC: That was fully clear to me, and I also tried to put myself in your position, which still did not prevent me from expressing my opinion. As far as this exhibition project is concerned, I was not aware that I would be so important to you. I am glad, and I feel honored. I was often surprised at how tenaciously and with what conviction you have pursued your own way over all these years. For example, I asked you if the alpine painting cycle is complete or not. You took my question seriously – several letters addressed to me bear this out – but you continued. You knew that the cycle was not complete. You kept wanting to add these brush strokes. These alpine paintings are not representative paintings, it is pure painting, every line, every brush stroke and every color was important to you.

AL: Yes, I have always been described as a good "colorist"; I have always found this to be very negative, especially the word "colorist". Even though it was a positive designation. We grew up in a very theory-laden time, in thrall to the French theories such as those of Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida or Claude Lévy-Strauss; whether we understood it all was secondary. It was also a time when painting was not in such great demand, and whoever still painted needed a theoretical basis.



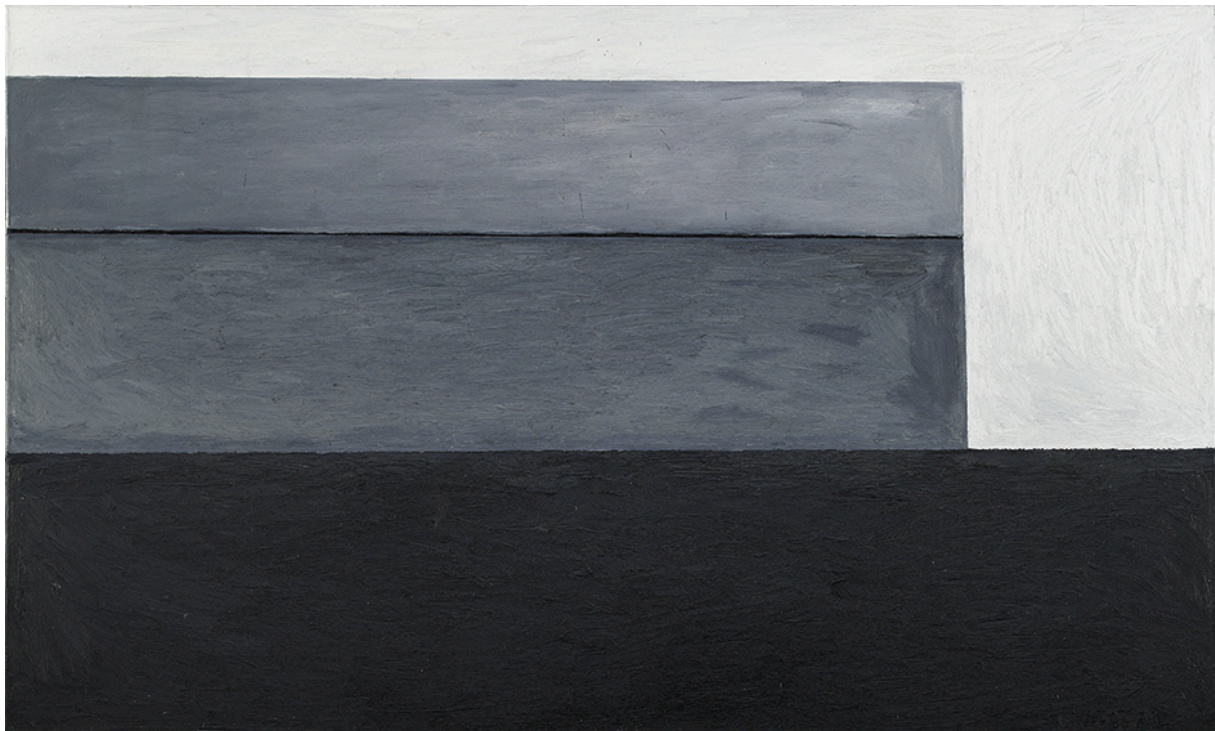
For me, painting is more conceptually related to the body, the skin, the hand, and not the eyes. That is why I have limited my method to the brush, the oil paints and the canvas. The canvas is the body, one stretches a skin across it and then adds another skin. In the end, it is what we are with our own bodies. The topics or the titles of the various cycles are just metaphors for it. A painting is a way of directing thoughts simultaneously inward and outward. For me, a painting is also a being that seeks contact with other beings. Both the painting and the person pose the basic questions about the internal context of the world.

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On color: Black-and-white painting was always a component of my work. My recollection of significance was just as important as it was for coloring. Back when black-and-white reproductions were common, one often noted that the great differences and contrasts in their intensity of color were difficult or impossible to differentiate in black and white. And I occasionally "copied" colored paintings a second time in black and white like this one (bank) from 1991 to find out whether the painting might perhaps evoke deeper, freer emotions without "color".

It was in the late 90's that I totally abandoned color. It was, as I look on it today, a reaction to party art and the approaching total commercialization into a global set of rules and regulations. I found that terribly insulting. Why had we put so much thought into what we were to do when this superficiality was afforded so much attention? I understand now that the art for enjoyment's sake at the turn of the century was a reaction against the way it had previously been "intellectualized". Back then, I simply retreated into black-and-white painting. One should not forget that white is the sum of all colors. Until recently, I have held to this reduction and it remains a mystery to me why this period of my work was not the most significant, but nonetheless the most successful. Yes, you often troubled me with your expectation that painting would soon see the return of color again.

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CC: Yes, I did not indeed understand that right away. For a long time it was hard to imagine your work without colors. I later comprehended that the key elements in your painting are the traces that the brush leaves behind. Your alpine paintings are in fact black-and-white but at the same time somehow obsessed with colors. In your painting, and naturally also in your woodcuts, I find new insights just as I do with the old masters; I can

question them and deepen my dialogue with the work. I had the good fortune to meet you and thanks to my visits to your studio, to accompany your work.

AL: The way you explain that is marvelous. But an artist's daily grind is much more prosaic. There are so many decisions that one forgets after the fact, they are marginal, but they fill up your working day and produce an overall image out of many, many details. My paintings are actually highly structured. Starting with the concept, the technique and the approach. But I could not paint any picture if it did not arise from some sort of emotional reaction. When we are talking about "alpine paintings" right now, it is this white void above the treeline, the feeling of isolation; this existential experience, this lack of orientation that I bring into the studio, not a visual image. I bring this experience and the thoughts that accompany my work into the studio with me. I cannot express the moment any other way than through the abundant white, but still it is not light painting, not cerebral painting, but something physical, bodily and sinful.

HS: You have talked a lot in general terms, but what role do these disagreements play in this exhibition? Was there an initial concept or did you start out from individual pictures than were them combined into this circuit?

AL: First my assistant Ursula prepared a dossier of copies of all my paintings – only paintings that are here in my studio – for Christian and me, from which we could choose freely. It was our goal to select ten paintings each. And these ten paintings were to serve as magnetic fields attracting other groups of paintings. We did not want to proceed chronologically, we wanted to take the works out of the various cycles and show their formal and content-based relationships. Nobody has attempted that to date. But then we proposed too many paintings. And it turned out that before the draft version, we compared our selection, and there were only two paintings that we had both selected, namely the two pictured on the invitation card. That pleased me greatly, because I do not simply seek confirmation, I do not want to see all the same works again that have already been shown. I wanted a new appraisal of my work, I want to find the red thread that connects them.

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CC: Yes, you gave me free hand. That is what you wanted. To that I must explain what I considered here. Most individual exhibitions are arranged chronologically. My idea was to produce a dialogue between the earlier and later paintings and create a sort of comprehensive overview. The viewer then feels whether the the body of work is coherent. We did not have the same selection criteria: You selected the pictures that you fought with the most, where you received the greatest recognition; but that was not important to me. I tried to bring your paintings together in one sweep. When visitors go from room to room, they should be able to reproduce the interrelationships and gain an overview of the entire wealth of your artistic creation.

Excerpts from a conversation between the artist Alois Lichtsteiner and the art lover Christian Cuénoud, which took place on February 4, 2016 in the artist's studio, moderated by Heinz Stahlhut, Curator of the Collection at the Lucerne Museum of Art. Transliteration by Christine Stauffer, Gallery Kornfeld Berne. English translation by Paul Kachur/Tom Lyons, Zurich.