

Ulrich Loock

THE SIDE FACING THE WORLD

In three rooms at the new Museum of Art Lucerne, the exhibition BIRKEN UND EIN BERG BIRCH TREES AND A MOUNTAIN features works from 1997 to 2001, which take birch-bark as their "motif". The exhibition also includes samples from a new series of works in which Alois Lichtsteiner returns to the theme of the birch-tree paintings, adding the motif of a mountain slope, part of which has thawed and part of which is still covered with patches of snow. Both motifs reduce the palette to black and white. That in itself distinguishes these pieces from earlier works: the lack of colour, the draining of colour, although the works still include intermediate tones, gradations between black and white. With their reduced colour, these works are simpler than their predecessors and, in their simplicity, most closely related to the two large-format monochromes in the double picture, PORTRAIT, from 1991. Simplification helps to concentrate on the fundamental purpose of this painting project, which Alois Lichtsteiner has been pursuing for years in various groups of works. Without deviation and with increasing focus, Lichtsteiner sticks resolutely to the project that he has recognised as his own, from one group of works to the next, and with many variations within a single group. That much is beyond doubt. The fundamental orientation of the project excludes the possibility of breaking away from it, of branching out, doing something else, changing the paradigm. There is something inevitable about this work. Its development is stasis in motion. What is it that compels the artist to further production, picture by picture?

In the works from 1997 to 2000, Alois Lichtsteiner refers to birch-bark as the extraartistic substratum of his painting. To this extent these pictures are "representational" – they derive their figurative aspects from a natural given: the various gradations of off-white in the bark, which, unlike the bark of other trees, has a horizontal structure of thin, long, pale but not white traces of growth, broken up with vertical cracks that have crusted with time. The painting of the birch-bark covers the entire picture field in such a way that the bark alone is painted. The boundaries of the tree-trunk do not enter the picture, and no attempt is made to reproduce its curvature. The painting adopts a figurative motif, but it is not naturalistic.

In the tree-bark Alois Lichtsteiner finds an analogy to his own conception of painting: just as the bark covers the wooden trunk of the birch tree, painting covers the canvas stretched on a frame – one of the qualities of birch-bark, the model for Lichtsteiner's painting, is that it can, usually, be stripped in whole pieces from the trunk. For this reason some cultures have seen birch-bark as the ideal raw material for making objects such as boats or clothes. For Alois Lichtsteiner painting is a material layer that covers an equally material support. To paint is to produce that covering layer. With the analogy of tree-bark and painting, Alois Lichtsteiner conceives the pictorial object (the unit of stretcher, canvas and applied painting) as a skin-covered body, an object among other objects in the world, an object like other objects in the world, or, more precisely: in nature. In this way his painting once again confirms the separation from the concept of painting dating back to the Renaissance, according to which the viewer looks through the physical reality of the painting to another reality elsewhere. For a twentieth-century painter such as Alois Lichtsteiner, this possibility of transcendence no longer exists. The "window" of which Alberti speaks, leading out of the painter's own closed and limited world and through which another world reaches out into his own, has become veiled, opaque, and thus itself become a visible object within the painter's own world. In order to formulate this concreteness of the painting, based on its analogy to other objects, Alois Lichtsteiner must exclude the boundary of the tree-trunk from the representation. The real boundaries of the pictorial body are equated with the boundaries of the pictorial object.

The notion of analogy is also at work in the production of a painterly relationship towards the reality of the birch-bark: the appearance of the birch-bark is not copied or simulated (as in illusionism). Rather, Lichtsteiner's painterly practice (brushstroke, modelling of paint, colour) is conceived as a duplication of the

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growth of the tree. With the movements of the brush over the canvas, the fixing of traces of paint and the creation of a coherence of colour elements, a result is produced (the picture) which does not reproduce the appearance of natural growth, but is rather equal to it. In this respect the new pictures differ from earlier works. Hitherto, the application of paint has been gestural, but usually even and mechanical. Unlike the new works, the dominant idea was to cover the picture surface in such a way that the structure of that covering layer did not have to be identical with the reality of the non-painterly given. In the new works, painting remains an autonomous practice, but it results in an appearance like the appearance of that which exists outside of painting, the birch-bark. The "quality" of this painting lies in the persuasiveness with which it can be assimilated to the appearance of the natural object without actually imitating it.

The more recent works, for which Alois Lichtsteiner uses the motif of the half-snow-covered mountain, differ from the birch pictures by virtue of the fact that the motif is defined by its vastness. In itself, the mountain is not a limited object like a tree trunk directly facing the viewer. Its size, its expanse, its location within a landscape resists the direct analogy to the skin-covered body. A tension is made apparent between the realisation of the painting as a physical, bodily object and the work's model, which does not have that object status. On the basis of his experiences with earlier works Alois Lichtsteiner paints a mountain range like a birch tree, but in these new pictures the covering of a background, the covering of the picture-body with a skin of painting becomes problematic. Lichtsteiner explores the essence of that covering, which seemed, in the birch tree paintings, to be defined thanks to their motif by a simple relationship of above and below. The motif this time is a snow-covered mountain, part of whose covering of snow has thawed to reveal the dark grey rocks beneath. But the vast expanse of the mountain range, unlike the birch-tree trunk, requires a position of distance, a view from afar, according to which the snow-covered mountain appears as an agitated structure of intersecting black and white patches. That is what Alois Lichtsteiner paints, black and white patches scattered across the canvas, but now the spatial distinction between what is above and what is below is no longer visible. We can only know it. To use the current academic terminology, in these pictures he eliminates the distinction of figure and ground – the tempo⁵⁶ rary layering of rock and snow, present in nature as a result of the thawing process, becomes a single layer of painting, distinguished by colours and shapes.

As a skin-covered body, the pictorial object becomes an object like other objects of nature. This analogy is shared by the birch-tree works and the picture of the mountain. Lichtsteiner's painterly practice is conceived in such a way that, in the birch-tree pictures, it is comparable to a natural process of growth: the material treatment of the paint means that it undergoes a process similar to the tree as it achieves the appearance of its bark. In the paintings of a mountain the situation is rather different: here, painting refers less to material reality and more to the way that reality presents itself to the eye from a distance. With the painterly abolition of the figure-ground distinction – what is above blurs with what is below – a picture emerges which contradicts the concreteness of the skin-covered body, or at least calls it into question. In this picture the upper skin absorbs the body beneath it and privileges the visible surface over that which it covers. But in Alois Lichtsteiner's work it is fundamentally the case that the analogy between the concreteness of the picture ("skin-covered body") and the concreteness of a natural object ("tree-trunk covered with bark", "snow-covered mountain") is based on the appearance of things, a separation of the visible from what those things "really are". Only the basis of appearance allows the production of painting as an object "like" other natural objects, without being bound to other parameters such as materiality within nature and the developments brought about by climate and growth.

To the extent that Alois Lichtsteiner's painting is "representational" in reference to a reality outside itself, it remains connected to the origin of painting, the desire

to produce an image of something. His painting does not seek to be an "object" along the lines of Frank Stella's idea of the "shaped canvas". The picture is something other than the thing that it pictures, it is a matter of detachment, perhaps of liberation from what exists. It is its transference to the dimension of the possible. This is probably equally true of painting in its mythical beginnings, the hand-prints from cave paintings, the copies of shadows, and even of those painterly illusions which deceived even fellow-painters so thoroughly that they responded to them as though they were real objects – that illusion only becomes

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apparent under the condition of dis-illusion, the narrative of that illusion. This detachment applies particularly to modern painting, as exemplified by Cézanne's observation that it is a RÉALISATION, something, we may assume that is not "the real" as such. Alois Lichtsteiner's painting participates in the modern concept of realisation "in parallel with nature", but in a special form: this realisation is not solely the concern of painting in the narrower sense, but of the painted object as a whole, with everything that it involves materially. As a skin-covered body, the painted object is an object like other objects, since it cannot be a window of transcendence, since it does not seek to be a window of transcendence, and the painted object represents another object in order to be distinct from itself.

The representation refers back to the pictorial object itself: in the picture of the birch-bark and the snow-covered mountain the painting represents what it is (what it can become through that representation). This kind of self-reflexiveness defines all of Alois Lichtsteiner's work. A reversal of the conception of the skin-covered body is the idea of the pictorial object as a vessel – the vessel is the negative of the body. A work from 1984 entitled THE CONTENT OF VESSELS represents a bowl tilted forwards to pour out the blue paint that covers the canvas above a horizontal line. On the other hand Alois Lichtsteiner has made a series of vessels in ceramics which have been painted with oil paint. Here the paint is not content flowing out of something, but a medium ready to receive a content – the representation of the pictorial object as an empty or an overflowing vessel.

Alois Lichtsteiner's mountain is not Cézanne's mountain. His painting is not RÉALISATION in the sense that it is the realisation of a view of the mountain, in which the mountain contains the sky and the sky the mountain, in which sky and earth embrace one another in a cosmic context. His representations of the mountain or the birch-bark do not mean those things, they mean nothing but the pictorial object itself, the skin-covered body. Consequently the painting is nothing but the realisation of painting, the realisation of a painting distinct from itself: the realisation of painting as the pure possibility of the real. Because there is nothing outside of this painting for it to be a realisation of (Cézanne's mountain), and as this painting has no "object", its inevitability exists in the infinite repetition of itself, picture by picture.

The essence of its re-productivity thoroughly defines this painting. The painted skin, painting as a skin, not only covers the picture body, but shows itself from outside. In earlier pictures the shape of a finger, a tongue or a leg (1991) is inserted into the skin of the painting – the skin is the organ of sensory (not visual) perception. In one series of pictures the skin is made concrete in the form of an erect penis, and the black cracks in the birch-bark open the skin like a vagina – the skin is sexed. With this sex the painting, the skin of an object distinct from itself, faces the world.

1 In a 1992 essay on Alois Lichtsteiner's painting I made a terminological distinction between BILD, "picture", MALEREI "painting" and GEMÄLDE, "pictorial object". By pictorial object I meant the unity of representation and aesthetic form that breaks down with modernism. On the one hand painting achieves a complete autonomy free of any reference outside painting, while on the other it abolishes the task of the aesthetic transformation of the real. A passage from Roland Barthes' MYTHOLOGIES set the tone: "It would appear that it is a problem of our age; for the time being there is only one choice, and that choice can be made only according to one of two equally excessive methods: either to posit and ideologise a reality that is entirely permeable to history, or, conversely, to add an impenetrable, irreducible reality, and to poeticise it. In a word: I cannot yet see a synthesis of ideology and poetry (by poetry I mean, in a very general sense, the search for the unalienated meaning of things)." I considered the achievement of Alois Lichtsteiner's work to lie in the creation of transitions between "picture" and "painting", without abolishing either of these. Cf. Ulrich Loock, Alois Lichtsteiner: Präzise Unbestimmtheit, in: Alois Lichtsteiner catalogue, Kunsthalle Bern 1992. Without wishing to call this view of the work into question, but in a slightly shifted view of its problematic areas, chiefly for a want of terminology, in this essay I use the term "painted object" for the whole complex of the picture-support and the painting applied to it.

