

Barbara Ellmerer

Kosmics

Opening Thursday 16th January 2015, 6-8 p.m.
Exhibition 17th January - 15th March 2015

In a tender gesture the brush gingerly touches the canvas, feeling the fabric and sliding on, careful not to exert too much pressure. Calmly it applies just enough paint to create a translucent effect. We are familiar with the first, tentative encounters of new lovers, whose seismograph hands explore their still strange bodies, the mysterious, changing densities and volumes beneath their skins. It is an almost static exploration that may seem to take forever.

Each coat applied by Barbara Ellmerer takes her deeper into her materials, both the canvas and the paint, and into the world which she creates at the seam between the two media where a new and unique space-time emerges layer by layer. It is tempting to use meteorological terms to describe the atmospheric expansion that manifests itself in the completed painting. However, this terminology is doomed to fail as clouds are too dense and too clearly defined and fog would be too impenetrable. Plasma might be a suitable metaphor, except for its extreme temperature that fails to chime with Ellmerer's chilly greys, blues and off-whites. Even where dark edges fall away into almost white depths, as they do in White Particle (Weisses Partikel, 2014), one can feel the icy cold of liquid nitrogen.

Giovanni Bellini painted many a sky in this manner and it was thus that Giovanni Battista Tiepolo's frescoes occasionally seduce our gaze into losing itself in the distance. In a more recent era, Mark Rothko's colour fields and Gotthard Graubner's coloured cushions come to mind. However, the colour fields and spaces created by these artists, who relied on the protective boundaries of Christian doctrine or the transcendental pathos of a World-War survivor, are all bound together either thematically or by their historical experiences.

There is none of that in Barbara Ellmerer's new paintings. There is nothing but pure expansion, a visual tuning-in to a movement whose speed and direction are unknown. A restless stillness alone becomes visible. Kosmics is the name the artist has chosen for her latest series. The title alludes to her interest in scientific hypotheses to explain the world, and to her own experience of the absence of any sensual dimension in physical laws. This is true for the cosmic dimension, for who can imagine magnetic fields, or the accelerating expansion of space? It is true also for minute processes that occur all around us. While we may be able to use imagery to explain how a blossom bursts open, the forces at work are invisible. A gulf remains.

If painting is perhaps incapable of bridging this void, it can nevertheless make us more aware. Painting can encourage us to acknowledge that in a world governed by the law of science, darkly luminous zones exist in its very shadows, albeit not in the sense of any radical, romantic opposition to rational achievement, nor as the kind of anthropological compensation postulated by German philosopher Odo Marquard. Rather, painting can open up its very own spaces that enable us to make different experiences.

Andrew James Ward

Between the Forest and the Trees

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In order to do so, however, painting needs to consider its own media. Sensations do not reside in its relationship to our environment but in colour and paint, and in how they affect the canvas. This is true, at least, for Ellmerer's paintings. In her new works she leads our gaze into a downward spin; she sends it plummeting, springing back and falling deeper into spaces in which protruding structures provide the only hold. Applied with rapid brush strokes, many of them are pastose and some of them rise from the canvas in bas-relief, obstructing, hovering in front of or emerging densely from the spaces. They juxtapose matter with evanescence to celebrate all that, in its delicacy, the ground has denied itself – contrasts, colour gradients and the glow and shimmer of paint.

Barbara Ellmerer tested all this in her previous series. Her exhibitions of the last three years – Calyx, Flux, Bio-Fiction – bear witness to the development of her interest in scientific models and in how they can serve to investigate her art, which oscillates between representation and abstraction, between dissolution and objectness. In her Kosmics series Ellmerer continues along the same path, pushing back materialness further into abstraction, into her model – without abandoning the sensual aspects of her approach.

Gerhard Mack