

Barbara Ellmerer New Paintings

Opening Saturday and Sunday, 21st & 22nd November 2020, 2-6 p.m.
Exhibition 24th November 2020 – 16th January 2021

Light, wispy shapes call to mind clouds or eddies in a stream, ripples or distant hills. A green like a quote from a meadow. Vertical structures that could be buildings: a lighthouse, perhaps – but a lighthouse that radiates darkness. And in between it all, the grainy expanse of unprimed linen, of rough, raw fabric that invites you to fantasize and invent tall tales of your own. The inducement for all this is a poem by Sappho, which has only survived as a fragment. In 26 images, Barbara Ellmerer approaches this poem by producing contrasting gaps with with colourful tumult.

Barbara Ellmerer, an artist who is usually generous with colours and formats, has discovered smaller canvases for herself, lighter paint applications, and scenic motifs with lots of empty space – an homage to the meaningful emptiness that one finds in classical Japanese art; in landscapes that arise without perspectives; in haikus that seem to emerge without the slightest narrative thread. Her works of art give the viewer or the reader individual motifs – a flower, a swell in the water, a leaf, a bird – and encourage them to take these mosaic tiles and from them, create their own pictures and thoughts.

Ellmerer's images reminiscent of landscapes appear similarly reduced. We see images that hint at a walking motion. Leaves and flowers, paths and waves, the green of the meadow and the grey of shadows appear newly rearranged for those who walk and think – activities that were not only indispensable for the ancient philosophers. Walking drives thinking forward. And thinking while you are walking, walking while you are thinking, you recognize that the world that you are roaming is never thought through to the end. There remain gaps in understanding: puzzles remaining to be solved.

Swiss artist Barbara Ellmerer lives in Zurich and dedicates herself to the study of nature with artistic media. She aims to explore the world of atoms with her brush, sensing the vibrations that the hidden engine of life is generating. Through the medium of painting, she practices natural philosophy, painting as if she were delicately tapping with the very tip of her brush yet at the same time seeking the very mainspring of existence. In painting, she asks what drives life in its innermost sense; where does the power come from that allows everything to become and to be?

Now, once again, she is broadening her creative quest. It is not just the inner life of the plants and other creatures that interests her. Instead, the artist is taking a certain step back, no longer casting her glance down at the veins of a leaf but up to the crests of hills, out to wide open spaces. Her questioning gaze is no longer directed toward the microscopic, but into the distance, knowing full well that the world – the real world – only comes into being inside your head.

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Barbara Ellmerer knows how to create images that appeal to thinking as well as to seeing, that call upon poetry and philosophy as well as the well-known motifs of art history. In addition to her smaller-format images, she has also created large oil paintings in the past few months that are more closely related to her older works. The rich application of paint, almost giving the images a relief-like structure, and the strong, sometimes shrill tones and hard contrasts – these are typical elements of Ellmerer's artistic signature. What is unusual, however, is that the motifs are clearly reminiscent of floral bouquets and thus they also playfully remind us of classical natures mortes. They were created during the lockdown. Traditionally, a still life is an image that looks as if it is standing still, but in doing so it communicates to us nothing so much as the advance of time: dry sprouts that were once lush with life; the wilting grace of delicate blossoms; the earthy tang of autumn that has replaced the joyous fragrances of springtime.

Barbara Ellmerer relates life's inescapable forward motion with a special, demanding forcefulness. Her bouquets fade into dusk's nighttime colours. Here and there a greenish yellow glows, full of toxic energy. Or a sugary pink dominates, soft and liquid, suddenly shot through with dark stains.

As viewed with Barbara Ellmerer, nature is both the starting and ending point of beauty and horror, of happiness and pain, and a never-ending source of friction for those inquisitive types who long to uncover its secrets – but in the end, always come away just guessing.

Alice Henkes

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