

Ascent

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The colours which have appeared in Alois Lichtsteiner's paintings since 2011 burn through the surfaces of his earlier work. These are muted, impure, or cold and hard colours – in these paintings even a bright red speck has the quality of ice. Among themselves, these colours create a context which accords a given picture a particular mood or atmosphere, though such a context has nothing to do with any naturally prevailing conditions. Indeed, there is no justification for the appearance of these colours beyond that of pure artistic arbitrariness. The artist simply desires – for no apparent reason – to use these particular colours, and is prepared to divorce himself from objective reality in order to paint the picture he wants. The given reality in each of these paintings is a snow-covered mountain slope upon which, in certain patches, the snow has melted. When colour appears in a field of snow it will always be somehow strange, like a will-o-the-wisp, yet not in the spectacular or disturbing kind of way which would demand an explanation. Quite the contrary, to the observer it is not immediately evident that these colours are out of place in the objective context of a field of snow.

As these particular colours, in the midst of this field of snow, create their own particular mood, and occur in those places which in the earlier work would have been occupied by patches of grey layered through to black, they represent

an arbitrariness which is relatively easy to overlook. This unexplained painterly decision has been taken in the context of an already existing schema – without a schema of some sort it is impossible to recognize the arbitrariness, which in turn, being bound to a pattern, itself becomes unnoticeable.

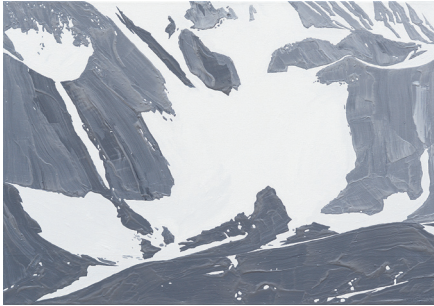
Lichtsteiner's earlier work, limited to the polarity between light and dark, grey and white, is based on photographs in which the blanket of snow is interrupted here and there by bare rock or regions of thaw. Yet Lichtsteiner has shaded in the areas where the photo shows snow, darkening the regions of light. Here too you cannot readily see the inversion, the substitution of object and background: there are no clearly defined forms with any obvious connection to the lighter or darker aspects of reality. The polarity inherent in these things makes them interchangeable.

The colours which burn through the surface in patches which would have been darkened in earlier pictures were already there, just covered in grey and black. Everything is layered on top of each other, whether in reality or in the imagination: the dark colours with the white painted around them fully obscure the layer of white primer beneath, which in turn covers over the naked canvas; or else there is no layer of white



paint and the grey appears alone on the primed background; paint lies under grey brushmarks. One might think that Lichtsteiner is painting his picture on top of another one which has faded from memory. How else can you explain the fact that he sometimes paints the same picture several times, not as a variation, but as a true repetition? In those patches where the colours break through to the surface it is as if a memory has broken through as well. For their part, the dark patches, and the white which has been painted over

them, also activate the faded memory of an earlier painting. In this sense, Lichtsteiner's work resembles a panel which has been repeatedly overwritten. The goal of painting is to capture an image which cannot be captured, until it finally becomes clear that all this repetition and effort have had no effect other than to depict the evasiveness of the inapprehensible.



Just as with memory, creating a painting involves layering one image over another. One painting covers an earlier one or refreshes it, bringing it to the surface, helping it break through the ossified layers above. A series of paintings created in sequence and juxtaposed in an exhibition is nothing other than the multi-fold repetition of an unattainable

picture – painting is slow and meditative, it takes place over years. Yet every repetition can only be a repetition if it is somehow differentiated from the object being repeated, just as every memory is ultimately different than whatever it is we are desperately trying to recall. On the other hand, the rips and fissures which separate one layer of a picture from another, just like lapses of memory, are also locations ripe for the insertion of artistic arbitrariness, which can lead to something new. Here, the longing to capture a fleeting image works directly counter to the longing to use the discrepancies between picture layers as a catalyst for arbitrary deviation. The prerequisite for extending the possibilities inherent in painting is an incessant commitment to the attempt to capture an intangible image.

A layer of snow covering a mountain slope changes constantly with the changing weather. The ground can be completely covered with white while on particularly steep sections the snow does not stick. The snow can be blown away by the wind or melt to such an extent that, at certain altitudes and at certain

times of the year, there is no snow left at all. For his paintings, Lichtsteiner chooses photographs in which the snow-covered and snow-free patches are more or less evenly distributed, or predominate in a particular direction. The image of a field of snow has captivated him for so long precisely because it is made up of a covering and a protuberant layer, exhibiting polarity of colour and interchangeability of form in ever-changing constellations – until it is ultimately dissolved.

A mountain slope covered in snow is not only a concise, multi-faceted and varied image, and therefore attractive for a painter, it is also a clear analogy for the issue of painting itself: just as a slope is covered with snow, a painting is an object covered with colour. This colour is not just some impression which stimulates the visual senses, it is also a material which creates a physical layer on the canvas. When Lichtsteiner paints a field of snow, he is depicting painting itself precisely in this sense of a skin-covered object.

It becomes clear, then, that this act of painting a field of snow through a process of layering is an effort to do two different things simultaneously: to paint a picture of a fleeting memory, and to cover a canvas with a skin. Skin is an organ of the sense that can be used for the haptic perception of itself, and there are indeed similarities between human skin and the skin of colour covering the body of a painting. The impalpable nature of the image and the very palpable skin of the painting are deeply interconnected. Yet they are also distinct from each other – if you actually do touch the painting, whether for real or in your imagination, you will only be able to touch the most recent manifestation of what in reality are multiple layers of images.

The series of eleven smaller-format paintings bearing the title *Aufstieg* (*Ascent*) recalls Lichtsteiner's earlier work in both the method and object of the painting. But these paintings are distinct as well. Lichtsteiner has taken several single images from a long train of events, a kind of cinematic sequence, and exhibited them in an order analogue to the movement of a person up a mountain pass. In each of these isolated images, like still

frames, you can see certain elements of the previous view, although – as a result of the forward movement – the objects in the paintings appear in differing proportions and constellations.

The title of the series indicates the presence of a person on the painted slope. Anything we can look at will, as it comes closer, eventually become something we can touch, and so in turn will not be visible anymore. During an ascent, an alpinist slides his or her skis from the spot where they had been in the snow towards a spot he or she has previously seen from a distance, all the while “creating” a series of views which continuously supersede each other. With the pictures in *Ascent*, Lichtsteiner is adding the temporal dimension of a sequence to the spatial aspect of his work as an accumulation of layers. In *Ascent*, the potential inherent in pictorial differentiation is fulfilled by means of a projection into the future: one painting creates the possibility of another by means of a movement through space. By placing images of successive moments next to each other, Lichtsteiner connects a memory-filled store of images with a sense of expectation. It is the expectation of finally satisfying a longing – one which has run through all his work over these many years – the longing to capture an unassailably elusive image: of the earth, of distance, of painting itself. As an alpinist approaches a point in the distance, however, he or she is in turn pulled towards an ever more distant point.

The alpinist, whose tracks lead to a point where his or her gaze had already been, seems to approach the wish of the painter to unite the sensory proximity to layers of paint, the “skin” of the painting itself, with a view of the fleeting image – but the alpinist can never “be” in the same spot that he or she is looking “at”. With colour bursting through the pictorial layers, and the subsequent transposition into a temporal sequence, Lichtsteiner is attempting to break free from being bound to a fleeting image, one which he cannot capture by transforming it into a “skin-covered object”. It is not likely that he will succeed. But failure in painting has a different quality from failure in life. It is not the end, but the beginning. Failure creates new images, which in turn are not content with defeat.

Figure p. 11: 2012.051
Figure p. 12: 2013.003