

Painting and Things

Helene Appel's exhibition "Letters" in the Drawing Room, Hamburg
14th September – 2nd November 2023

Things lying on the floor. Or on the table, perhaps. Objects or loose substances resting horizontally on the surface, entirely at the mercy of gravity. Or so it seems. But here, the thing is a picture. The flat ground is tilted by 90°, together with the subject, and hangs on the wall as a painting. This gesture, simple as well as literally ground-breaking, enables Helene Appel to bring the (illusionary) space of representation into her painting, into the classic panel painting – while at the same time revealing the illusion. In her veristic depiction of mostly everyday objects, the artist, who studied with Olav Christopher Jenssen at the HfbK Hamburg, has been pursuing a form of painterly realism for almost two decades now, simulating her subjects both blatantly and effectively. Withdrawing all perspective – the images are frontal, the horizon is erased from the painting – Appel gives the painted object a three-dimensional, strikingly tangible presence.

She keeps the imaginary pictorial space emphatically flat, defining it basically by the scale of the respective object: the delicate line of a leafless cherry twig in *Twig* (2019), for example, which also recalls Lucio Fontana's anti-illusionist cutting into the canvas despite its fine-cast shadow; a series of loosely thrown noodles in *Spaghetti* (2018), which demonstrate a range of Mikado-like (dis)order with precision; the pale blue *Fishing Net* (2016), which stretches across the full large-format work in irregular lozenges, covering the whole of the painting but visually receding almost completely, due to its spindly delicacy, and so culminating in a rhythmic flicker: Appel's painting consolidates the illusionistic pictorial space and does so even more when it allows its depth to tend towards zero. This leads to surprising combinations – in one way or another, her motifs cover the real canvas with pure illusion.



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In her painting, Helene Appel captures the object as an image. In a strange way, this is virtually the opposite of conventional realism.¹ After all, she conceives the painting from the subject, thinking about how a specific object will structure a painting in its own way, and what paradoxes this will smuggle into the manifestation in each case. As a viewer, it is all too easy, under the impression of a successful illusion, to forget that this presupposes a complex process of translation from thing to image.



Appel is not concerned with design or any stylistic adaptation of the objects she depicts. Yet it is precisely the greatest possible fidelity to reality that makes each of the so very different subjects a challenge, a sounding out of what a thing demands of painting, and how the image and the painting process are structured towards these demands. In other words, how do you achieve the same conclusive impression of the object's complete presence by using quite diverse painterly means? In the painting process and through material experiments, each time Appel investigates anew how an object can be represented coherently in painting. One basic rule is to translate motifs on a scale of one to one – which leads to paintings of different sizes: she has developed a wide range of object qualities and image formats, from small shell pasta in *Shell pasta* (2017) to the large-scale variants of *Puddle* (2011), from tree trunks simulated in painting such as *Oak* or *Maple Tree* (both 2019) to cut vegetables in *Chopped Fennel*, 2021. Depending on the motif, she employs inventively different painting techniques and materials from oil to acrylic, gouache and watercolour to masking fluid and encaustic in order to meticulously reproduce the specificity of an object. She leaves the canvas itself unprimed; the beige-brown textile backing functions as a haptic reference to the medium of painting as well as a neutral base on which the

painted things can unfold their illusionary power out of context.

¹ In an email conversation on 20th August 2023, Appel further explicated her perspective of a quasi “reversed” realism: While she is always experimenting anew and also materially in the medium of painting with a view to the subject matter of the picture, the development of the painting thus literally depends on this object; on the other hand, conventional realism could be seen as a method of making oneself virtually independent of the picture’s subject. But she finds the former, says Appel, “more realistic”.

In her current exhibition at the Drawing Room, Appel is showing new paintings from 2023; the selection had not been fully decided at the time of writing. But it includes two versions of *Letter*: as always with Appel, the works are characterised by matter-of-factly simple titles. Each painting depicts the back of an envelope – congruent with the canvas and hung in portrait format. One shows a straight adhesive flap, the second painting is more elongated and has a slightly rounded, pointed flap; both simulate minimal traces of use. Making the reverse into the motif is as ingenious as it is laconic: the picture space is flat, the pictorial information reduced – neither the addressee nor the stamp or postmark can be seen. And in terms of painting, too, there is a reason behind this: the format-filling white on white of the motif enables Appel's realism to approach the impression of conventional primer with irony – the difference is made by only a few painted shadings and creases.



A comparably complex, surprising realism can be found in *Potato Peelings*. Fresh potato peelings are scattered loosely over the canvas, which is unprimed as always and painted to deceive the eye. What may seem arbitrary at first glance is actually a composition with a surprisingly graphic quality: this begins with the fact that the brownish golden-yellow stripes contain the artist's peeling movement; they had to be fresh for painting, and in the process of manual peeling they were given a specific shape. So, this element of the gestural, which is eliminated in a realistic depiction, is admitted into the factually objective pictorial space in an indirect, almost ironically professional way. By comparison to its small forerunner, here a larger number of peelings come into play, also raising questions of composition. Appel decided to place the peelings so that they fall loosely onto the canvas, not bundled together but distributed over the surface. This results in a remarkable “typography” and also visualises the notion of a temporal sequence: a moment of repetition, the gesture of a hand movement. Apart from such conceptual considerations, however, the painting is fascinating from a primarily painterly point of view. It is hard to get enough of what Appel achieves here with simple “remnants of peel”: the bright yellow interior of the peelings contrasts impressively with brown exteriors, their sharply defined contours always produce new and yet similar forms,

their distribution over the large format creates a lively rhythm that we never fully grasp, nevertheless.



In two other paintings, *Cleaning* and the smaller *Foam*, Appel translates something as fleeting and seemingly banal as dishwashing foam into painting. For the smaller painting, she poured water with washing-up liquid over a canvas and photographed this in order to paint the result. For this type of motif, too, she invented a method of painterly, “realistic” realisation: choosing one of several photographs, then transposing the countless bubbles by applying masking fluid drop by drop. The acrylic layer that is subsequently painted over the bubbles rolls off in the affected areas, and the pigment concentrates at the edges of the bubbles – just like what happens to air bubbles in washing-up water. What sounds rather technical here may serve as an illustrative example of Appel’s method of thinking and developing a painting consistently from the object.

The motif of *Cleaning* came about as a consequence of the first painting: when pouring the foam, some of it ran onto the floor, and it was only while wiping the floor that Appel noticed the interesting shapes which had formed. Again, painting the foam with her wiping motion introduces the aspect of the gestural into realism. Considering that Appel basically conceives and interprets a painting as a painted object, this aspect is rather surprising. It is also interesting with respect to her idea of a realistic painting – as a point of contact and friction with gestural abstraction.

Jens Asthoff (Translation: Lucinda Rennison)

Helene Appel

LETTERS

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Opening times: Tuesday – Thursday from 12 noon – 7 pm and by arrangement

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