

The Never-Ending Painting

For the exhibition *The Ever Sunset* by Christof John in the Drawing Room, Hamburg

11th September–24th October 2024

It seems that everything is out in the open in these paintings: we see complex abstractions of lines and patterned structures, strictly two-dimensionally composed pictorial structures beyond any kind of representational or perspectival illusionary space. Concrete painting and a resolute “What you see is what you see!”¹, we might assume. In paintings by Christof John (*1984 in Hanover, lives and works in Cologne), mostly small-scale elements overlap and interpenetrate, condensing into rhythmic-visual microstructures across different surfaces.



Hints of serial-composition principles shimmer through repeatedly from the texture of the motifs, as in the large formats from 2022 shown here: *Untitled (Ticket XVII/1)*, *Untitled (Ticket XVII/2)* and *Untitled (Ticket XVII/3)*.

Here, fields of interlocking triangles extend, are interrupted, sometimes also underpinned by square structures covering the whole surface, into which parallel clusters of lines with different widths are interwoven in their turn. However, nowhere is the serial quality established in each painting seamless, and certainly the square and line patterns, tilted out of the horizontal, contradict any formalistic, overarching serial-pictorial logic.

Instead, the patterns here merge and intensify in cross-fading and opposing dynamics to form a consistently incommensurable whole.

This leads to a paradoxical perceptual situation: although the pictorial means are clearly visible at all

¹This was put succinctly by US painter Frank Stella, who in the 1960s concentrated on the formal means of painting with minimalist panels and thus also turned against the semantic exaggerations of Abstract Expressionism; quoted from: Bruce Glaser, *Questions to Stella and Judd*, in: *Art News*, Vol. 65, No. 5. September 1966, p. 59.

times, the longer you look at Christof John's paintings, the more this orientation, and together with it the full compositional order, begins to oscillate and waver – and this is triggered still more by the subtly placed coloration of a few coordinated chromatic tones. It is as if these pictures show us a peculiar discrepancy between seeing and understanding – not as an abstract pictorial statement, but directly as an aesthetic experience. It is almost impossible to grasp the complexity of the compositions as a whole and bring their details together visually, although those details can be tracked from every point; instead, the foreground and background are constantly blurred to the gaze as it searches for a foothold – and this also means that the image is constantly revealed anew. The expressly two-dimensional composition of the painting opens out surprisingly into the multidimensional.

The artist himself describes what is uncovered here as the notion of a “never-ending painting”, which inspires and drives him: The image as part of a more complex overall structure, from which “a sequence is laid down like a skin on the image carrier”.

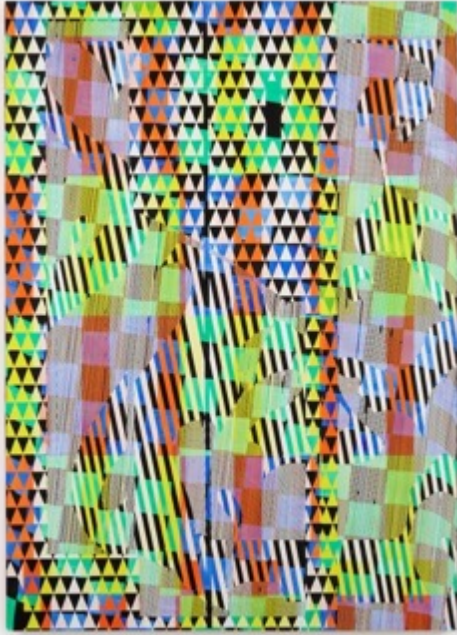
He adds in conversation that “at best, the individual work [carries] the potential that you can never view it to the end, that you may never get to the bottom of it, you are thrown out again and again.”² This actually describes our visual experience when contemplating John's paintings quite well. For the artist, the outcome is the image's openness to the viewer, which is also evident in his handling of the coloration: while the colour fields in his paintings appear to comprise dense overlays and distortions, a second glance reveals that the colours are generally placed next to each other without being mixed, and the nuances are therefore created only in the eye of the beholder. Meticulously calculated as these images are, John understands his work in terms of interaction: the painting's actual impact, the people looking at it are “an important variable that completes my work”³, to use the artist's own words.

Regarding the three *Ticket XVII* panels and another large format *Untitled (Ticket XV/4)* (2023) presented in the exhibition, it is the title alone that reveals they are part of an overarching series.



² Email conversation between Christof John and the author on 1st September 2024. Christof John takes the idea of a never-ending painting further in one other respect: This is linked to the fact that ‘I also see my artistic work as something spiritual, but not in an esoteric or religious sense,’ says John. Although there is a specific work on the wall, perhaps ‘the real art lies between the work and me, and surrounds me. Then, the work would “perhaps [be] more like a vessel that is filled. At best, however, the vessel is always too small and the art bubbles over, needing more space.”

³ Statement by the artist, August 2024, unpublished.



John began working on this group of works in 2019; the series currently extends to number XIX. Individual intersections are “sometimes more diverse, sometimes there are also bigger overlaps”.

Or, as in the case of the exhibited paintings *Ticket XVIII/1-3*, “something like sub-chapters or definite siblings.” What unites this extensive, multifaceted, and as yet unfinished series is the “consistently similar working method” (more about this later) and also, according to John, the fact that it has come along with a change in his artistic approach.⁴ Moreover, as the title suggests, they all share a common reference: in fact, they are based on the misprint of a ticket the artist happened to come across. He continued to develop this as a subject, and it is characteristic of John’s eye as an artist that he noted these complex patterns, watermarks, etc., including their imperfections, on such a banal, everyday disposable item such as a ticket, which is not usually examined very closely at all.

The misprint “triggered something for me,”⁵ he says, and “instead of stripes, there were sometimes small boxes, with simply the paper of the ticket underneath, with small symbols on. There was a surprising structure in there, and the way the layers were superimposed turned into my starting point for the series.” However, the found object is not made into a motif directly and as such; instead, it functions as stimulus leading to the independent, completely abstract images of an entire group of works. Nevertheless, abstraction in Christof John’s work is always seeped in reality and is not a self-referential, abstract form of painting founded only in itself. “Everything has a worldly reference” that is realised in my work, he says, “and I think you can sense that in some places, even if you can’t quite grasp where something comes from.” This interweaving of reality is also evident in the painting process.

John does not implement preplanned pictorial concepts, he develops the paintings in a process that remains surprising and unpredictable, even to himself, whereby he combines a

⁴ Until then, John had consciously conceived paintings as individual works, forbidding himself to repeat combinations of colour or form once they had been used. It was only when he started working on the extensive Ticket series that he began to explore the full range of interpretation that can lie within a subject, describing this as a liberation in the creative process. ‘This elaboration had less to do with repetition than with opening more and more doors.’ In this sense, the series is open - which does not mean that it cannot be completed at some point.

⁵ Christof John in a voice message to the author on 29th August 2024.

high degree of precision with inspiration and sudden ideas.⁶ John's accuracy is precise beyond mere rational perfection, a kind of exactitude that for him “has something to do with being human and a certain warmth”. You can see this, and it is equally evident in the artist's specific “error culture”: minor imperfections or the material's own dynamics during the painting process can, according to John, “turn into gifts that animate the work and bring it to life.”⁷ Not all of them, of course, because this is also a matter for artistic intuition and decision-making. But John welcomes them rather than avoiding them as far as possible, and incorporates this attitude into his pictorial concepts: “Lines can develop snagging,” he says, “each one is an individual, not technically perfect as if made by a plotter.”

This kind of ‘evolved precision’ and painterly sensuality is much more obvious in the originals than in photographic images of the paintings. Standing in front of the works, you can see more clearly that the complex structures of his paintings are interspersed with fine irregularities: Traces of paint, smudges, occasional fingerprints, or the delicate pencil lines of a preliminary drawing that was then implemented in the painting in a different way. It is even more astonishing how the eye can superimpose all this.

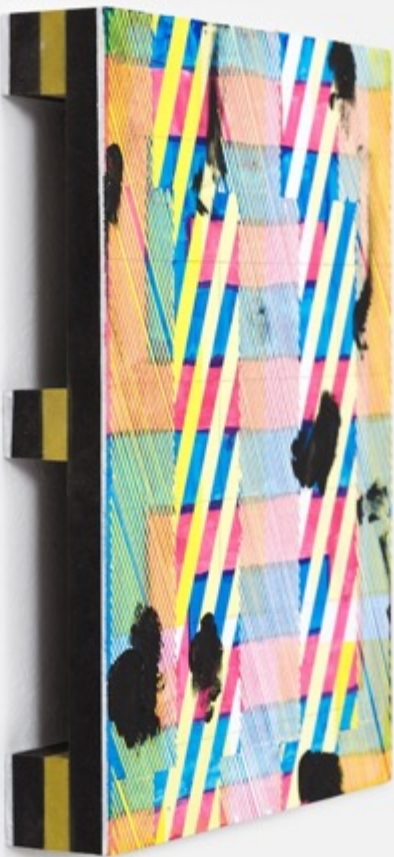
In fact, John usually begins with a pencil and the sketchy encircling of a structure on primed MDF panels. From there, he continues to work on the paintings with oils and acrylic paints in extremely varied, basic geometric shapes such as squares, circles and triangles. The elements are laid out on different levels and sub-levels, between which distortions and shifts also occur. However, John does not use templates, and it is not least this signature, which is almost impossible to discern in the overall precision, that gives his paintings a particular vibe. In many works, such as the Ticket series, he masks the entire picture surface with foil in a final step and works into this using a scalpel. In this way, he exposes fine lines that subsequently cover the picture, using a sculptural-drawing tool for painterly purposes.



⁶ John himself describes this as follows: ‘Even if something like a plan may exist at the beginning of a work, openness in the process is very important. For example, if there is a drawing as a template, its character is more that of a telephone doodle, it is not fully formulated. If the drawing were fully formulated, I would feel that the form had already been used up.’ See Note 3.

⁷ See Note 5; all the following quotes come from this source.

In this way, the paintings become individuals during the painting process, ‘beings’, as he says. Again, this should not be understood esoterically; they are just not serial-formal works – despite the frequent and considerable similarity in the composition of the images. For John, this also means seeing the works holistically, as pictorial objects in which the support is more than just a stage for paint. Bearing this in mind, he points out that “a painting, even if it is square, actually has six sides – with the sixth side facing the wall.” This attention to the object-like can be seen in the Ticket paintings, for example, in the fact that the side edges are also painted. Following the same logic, John works in part with irregularly shaped pictorial bodies, although these are not on display in this exhibition. Smaller formats such as the two *Untitled* (2023, 2024) shown here emphasise the object character with painted plinth elements that bring the picture surface away from the wall. In this way, we see “that it also has a reverse side or you get a greater understanding of that,” says John.



This view of the work’s object character should not be confused with the idea of the shaped canvas now established in art, in which, according to the artist, “the form normally occurs first and then the painting.” He himself wishes to conceive things more organically; for him, there is no hierarchisation of materials, and so the picture ground can change with the painting process by “cutting a hole or a corner at the end,” says John.

The two small formats *Untitled* feature a few expressive settings over a multi-layered, colourful-abstract picture plane in one case, and a concentration of expressive settings in the other. Here, the colour black is staged in such a painterly way that it overlays the ‘actual’ picture plane like a visual disturbance, in some cases even erasing it. This is characteristic of John, not only because he stages the ‘mistake’ as an independent compositional element and integrates it quite successfully in aesthetic terms. It is also interesting from a painterly point of view because it is almost impossible to distinguish between the contrasting painterly gestures

of applying and wiping away: on the one hand, we can see extensions of fine bristles, and the brushstroke is noticeable. In other places, however, the black has clearly been wiped or erased with a finger or a cloth. In this way, both painterly actions are staged performatively and merge inseparably. Here, Christof John's typical motif of error and pictorial disruption falls just short of the impression of planned form – and at the same time it expands into a kind of irregular ornament corresponding in many ways to the underlying, coloured picture plane. Form and the dissolution of form move closer together.

Jens Asthoff

(Translation: Lucinda Rennison)



Images (Page 1 – 6):

Untitled (Ticket XVII/1), 2022

Oil, Acrylic, Pencil, MDF

180 x 130 x 5 cm

Untitled (Ticket XVII/3), 2022

Oil, Acrylic, Pencil, MDF

180 x 130 x 5 cm

Untitled (Ticket XV/4), 2023

Acrylic, Pencil, MDF

140 x 106 x 3,5 cm

Untitled, 2023

Acrylic, Pencil, MDF

33,5 x 23,5 x 5 cm

Untitled (Ticket XV/2), 2022

Oil, Acrylic, Pencil, MDF

180 x 130 x 5 cm

Untitled, 2024

Acrylic, Pencil, MDF

54 x 28,5 x 5 cm

Photos: Mareike Tocha, Cologne

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