

Helene Appel In Full Light

A TEXT BY
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I saw two large paintings of Helene's a couple of years ago, at an edition of FIAC that I found particularly attractive, I now do not remember why. Then, at an exhibition at the Pecci Museum in Prato, entitled *La figurazione inevitabile* [Inevitable Figuration], and again at a gallery in Bologna, where her works were juxtaposed with small paintings by Antonio Calderara⁽¹⁾. Later, we met one afternoon in Berlin for a family *Kaffee und Kuchen* at the Hamburger Bahnhof, joined by Bettina Buck, whose studio – we found out – was very close to Helene's, and the two also had common friends in London. That quick family meeting had somehow seemed a proper introduction to her work, consistent with the imagination that her paintings yield, and I was left with the wish to talk with her again. We said goodbye with the promise to meet again soon.

We have not done so yet, and so this *Show and Tell*, as often happens, is an attempt to pick up on her work, which I have kept thinking about during the time since my first contact with it. I confess that I again broke the rules that I had set for myself for this series of texts, because I had told Helene quite precisely what works I wanted to write about, following the suggestion, apparently outdated, of the Veronica (the Holy Face), about which I was reading an essay by Georges Didi-Huberman while I was sending her my invitation to this column. Helene responded by adding one piece which encouraged me to follow the direction I had caught sight of – surprising in its being seemingly inconsistent, and yet appropriate in this sequence.



Green Towel, 2014, 66 x 38 cm, acrylic and watercolour on hessian
photo by Hans-Georg Gaul, courtesy the artist and gallery Luis Campaña

Fig. 01

The recurring themes in the works of Helene Appel are more or less always the same, taken from everyday life, or rather from an everyday home life, as if she were painting things that are under her gaze, in a home kitchen. Chopped leeks, grains of rice, tea towels: painted in such detail that they look real, or like a *trompe-l'oeil*, and yet, as a result of their proportions in relation to the canvas, almost abstract. Subjects – if you will – of a staggering banality, obviously painted in place of something else, in order to say something else. Painted from life and, we can imagine, slowly. One brush stroke at a time, day after day, because painting remains of all the arts really the one that best identifies the artist with his own studio, the site of a daily drill, the stage of a dialogue with oneself, attempts sometimes successful and sometimes not. Those of Helene Appel are still lifes with only one subject at a time. Reminiscent of Chardin, for their light, or the few, beautiful still lifes of Zurbarán, in which a cup or a rose appear to jut out of the picture, like in an offering; or even – inevitably – Morandi, for the painstaking care with which, we imagine, Helene places the items that she will paint in different sizes and layouts. Here, like elsewhere, vegetables, dishes, fish and meat, fabrics and branches or flowers, which are the classic themes of the genre, are pretexts to reaffirm the essence of painting: indexes that serve to refocus attention on the surface of the painting, and on the picture as a surface. The grid – which Rosalind Krauss resumes in *Under Blue Cup* so many years after its first formulation – is the device through which the painting of the twentieth century rejects representation (and perspective), electing the surface as its theme, and opening to the notion of specificity of the medium. But if in a modernist painting the grid – to be able work as a form of self-definition – must match the support, *Grünes Handtuch* (2014) seems to graciously make fun of this modernistic *topos*. The orthogonal-line pattern does not adhere perfectly to the painted surface, revealing the fact that here we are in the presence of an abstract image. However, it is clear that although the artist has not given up the framework of perspective, this is not built according to the Alberti rules, because the cloth that occupies the entire picture plane does not invite one into the picture, almost preventing one to get in (in other words, it invites the eye to wander along the membrane, non to penetrate it). Perspective, like the grid, is evoked only to be negated by a plane rotation: in Helene Appel's paintings, objects are always represented as if they were viewed from above, arranged horizontally on the canvas, and then upturned vertically again once the picture is completed. Thus, what happens with this double move? That from representation the object becomes a footprint or trace, turning the pictorial space into something else.



Plastic Sheet, 2013, 191 x 116 cm, watercolour on linen
photo by Marcus Schneider. courtesy the artist and Approach gallery

Fig. 02

Thus, in *Plastic Sheet* (2014) the eye scans the surface of the picture without finding, at a first glance, anything but the canvas itself, on which – because of a few touches of white to simulate the reflection of light on a fold – finally a sheet of cellophane can be detected. Again, the canvas is almost entirely filled up by the subject. An obviously paradoxical subject for the representation, because it is transparent and places this work half way between a dexterity test and a theorem, in a way not unlike the famous painting *The Reverse of a Framed Painting* by Cornelius Norbertus Gijsbrechts. In this 1675 work, the painter painted the back of a picture: nothing but canvas stretched over a wooden frame, almost inviting the viewer to turn the picture around in order to discover its true negative, and recognize, in what had been hastily turned to search for an image, the true subject of the piece. The object of this piece – says Victor Stoichita – is “the picture as a thing,” a “meditation on the painting as an object and as an image”: thus, the root of what would later become the founding myth of modern painting – the grid – lies in genre painting, and it is worth adding, albeit *en passant*, that still life – the *minoris pictura* – is the actual place of a continuous reflection on the status of the image. Thus, if *The Reverse of a Framed Painting*, not representing anything, represents the wholeness that painting is, similarly *Plastic Sheet* is the nothingness and the wholeness of the image.



Water Spill, 2014, 76 x 53 cm, watercolour on linen
photo by Christopher Burke. courtesy the artist and James Cohan gallery

Fig. 03

Even more diaphanous, almost undetectable, is the water stain that spreads on the canvas in *Water Spill* (2014) – which is not even that little bit of matter that is cling wrap. What kind of image do we have here? In ancient Rome, the term *imago* did not define the face, but the death mask, taking the portrait back to its religious function, which may explain the aura that seems to emanate from any representation of a face. Of all the portraits, there is one that defies the logic of representation, and that not only evokes but calls into question the status of the impression: the *Mandylion*, the Veronica, the Shroud, the Holy Face are impressions, images obtained through contact⁽²⁾. Traced back to their theological context, these are *acheiropoieta*, i.e. icons not painted by human hand, although here we are not so interested in the dogma as much as in the way it functions, because it specifies the semantic order in which the works of Helene Appel are placed. A painting by Zurbarán, *The Holy Face* (1631), is again useful for a comparison. The monochrome pictorial surface is almost entirely filled up by a white cloth on which one can see the faint imprint of Christ's face, left on the fabric by Christ himself when wiping his face on the way to Golgotha. The cloth hangs from its upper corners by means of two strings stretched outside the frame of the painting. It is not an entirely new image, but for some reason more than any other lends itself to being read as a still life and therefore to match the status of the impression, i.e. the presence, together with the representation, typical of the narrative statute of painting. Zurbarán definitely did not invent the iconography of the Holy Face, but in this painting he represents it as a still life, in this way comparing ostention (of the Veronica) with frontality (of the picture), and thus matching two genres: the still life and the portrait. The fabrics that Helene Appel paints, the exudations that transpire on the canvas, the transparencies, are all Veronicas offered for ostention, like Zurbarán's *The Holy Face*, all attempts to question painting in its being a threshold: the boundary between visible and invisible, representation and presence.



Beinscheibe, 2014, 17 x 15,2 cm, encaustic on linen
photo by Marcus Schneider. courtesy the artist and James Cohan gallery

Fig. 04

The subject of painting, these works by Helene Appel seem to suggest, is painting itself, but painting is also the thing that is under our eyes, like the slice of red meat that stands out in the middle of the canvas in *Beinscheibe* (2014), powerful in its tiny proportions, offered frontally (almost to confront us, like a face) to our gaze. The incarnation of an idea.

Notes

1. Both exhibitions, *La figurazione inevitabile* [Inevitable Figuration], Museo Pecci, Prato (2012) and *Luce, Giorno*, [Light, Day], P420, Bologna (2013), were curated by Davide Ferri. This article is somehow dedicated to Davide, and to Alessandro Sarra. They know why.

2. This is how Georges Didi-Huberman talks about it in *La ressemblance par contact. Archéologie, anachronisme et modernité de l'empreinte*, Editions de Minuit, Paris 2008.