

# Shift in Painting

## The Ploner Collection

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Neue Galerie Graz, Universalmuseum Joanneum,  
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**Shift in Painting**

The Ploner Collection

**Neue Galerie Graz**

**Universalmuseum Joanneum**

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What can painting do, what can it be? What's special about it? Where does it take us? This exhibition provides an overview of the possibilities, forms, specific characteristics and also the deconstruction of painting. Generously donated to the Neue Galerie by the Heinz Ploner collection, 47 works enter into a dialogue with other works from the museum's existing collection. Its focus lies on exploring a traditional medium so often declared dead and yet whose shifting ability to transform manages to keep it alive and topical as ever.

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## Abstraction and Absolute Colour

In the years after the Second World War, painting was predominantly abstract. Great variation can be seen in the expressions this found, however, ranging from the concrete through to a radical dissolution of form. As pioneers of the Informel in Austria, **Maria Lassnig** and Arnulf Rainer influenced the generations of artists who followed: the aim was that painting should no longer be strictly composed but instead 'formless'. Intuitive, spontaneous expression took over from careful consideration, while fields and patches of colour replaced depictions of concrete objects on the canvas. Abstract art in post-war Austria received huge support at the Galerie nächst St. Stephan in Vienna. It was here that Arnulf Rainer, **Wolfgang Hollegha**, **Josef Mikl** and **Markus Prachensky** came together as a group of artists in 1956. These young artists had little interest in realistic representation, yet their art did still refer to concrete objects: Hollegha's paintings are unconceivable without his close examination of objects that he collects for this purpose. Mikl, on the other

hand, starts with the human figure but does not render it in detail. Instead, he examines its basic shape and how the parts of the body relate to one another. Decades later, the generation of abstract artists from the 1950s and 1960s remained influential. Eventually, the 1980s and 1990s saw a fresh 'boom' in painting with young artists such as **Herbert Brandl** taking control of the art scene. In contrast to the conceptual art of the 1960s and 70s, which favoured theoretical thinking over visual realisation, the interest now lay in the sensuality and expressiveness of painting.

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## Monochromy, Surface and Space

The look of a painting depends on how it relates to the subject matter. The less it deals with concrete objects, the more painting thinks about itself and focuses on particular elements such as delimited area, colour, the application of paint, the relationship between background and figure as well as the illusion of spatiality. **Erwin Bohatsch** does not seek to represent objects, creating instead a white surface—except for the

dark picture edges. The picture surface shows the traces of the paint that was applied in layers. **Walter Vopava**, on the other hand, covers black backgrounds with fields of pale paint, which vary from grey to white depending on how thickly they are applied. His pictures do not portray concrete objects; they contain just a suggestion of spatiality at the very most. **Herbert Brandl** likewise moves progressively further from the depiction of objects, preferring to apply paint spontaneously and expressively. Artists such as **Karl Hikade** and **Hubert Scheibl** shift increasingly towards the use of monochrome, so emphasising colour as a basic element of painting.

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## Colour as a Substance between Reality and Representation

As well as being a shade of colour, paint can also be understood as a tangible material. **Franz Grabmayr** focuses on paint as a mass that can be formed, mixing it with sand to produce relief-like surfaces. **Gunter Damisch** piles paint onto the surface with a brush and palette knife, then

plays with its encrustations, bumps and depressions. As well as creating the illusion of space or three-dimensional objects, painting can itself become a spatial thing. This is clearly demonstrated in **Eugène Leroy's** work: paint is layered thickly (sometimes over several years) onto the canvas so that the picture grows into a heavy, massive object.

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## Graphisms and Rendering Visible the Inner World

Painting has repeatedly served as a means of expressing both conscious and unconscious psychological processes—a tendency that influenced painters in the 1980s and 1990s too. The writer and visual artist **Henri Michaux** (1899–1984) was a key exponent of an approach that sought to transfer emotions into pictures. Michaux deliberately used states of intoxication in order to put the unconscious onto paper. The result was pictures made up of shimmering, ambiguous symbols. Michaux despised the static, fixed and complacent: 'Like me, the line is seeking without knowing what it is seeking ...' he wrote. The line

becomes a trace of the psychological —pressure, speed and intensity reflect the inner states that caused it. In this respect, as a basic element of drawing, the line is also significant for painting. As in **Gunter Damisch's** work, for example, which confronts us with a turbulent jumble of fantastic shapes. Sometimes these shapes resemble plants or animals, at others they are like micro-organisms or even celestial bodies.

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### **Herbert Brandl, 'Aqua' (1994)**

The hectic, dissatisfied feelings we encounter in Henri Michaux's works also proliferate in this video work by **Herbert Brandl**. The shimmering image here is a close-up of the surface of some water, which Brandl has also altered graphically. The shot of the water becomes an abstract picture; the video has the quality of both a drawing and a painting about it.

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### **The Abstract Line, Gesture and Automatism**

At the end of the 1980s **Otto Zitko** stopped producing oil paintings and adopted the line as his artistic principle instead. His works are reminiscent of the small doodles one makes absent-mindedly on bits of rough paper while talking on the phone: scribbles of a private, intimate nature. In Zitko's work, however, the line is produced on a large scale, expanding into extensive murals. The line, the basic element of drawing, circles around a centre, becoming denser and coming close to the painterly surface. It is the trace of the gesture, the physical movement (which can be more or less sweeping depending on the size of the picture carrier) and has its own rhythm. It does not depict concrete objects; at the most, one could think that it was looking for them. The process that produces the line is not based on any formal constraints, and does not aim at representation or meaning.

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### **The Constructive Line as the Opposite of the Gestural Line**

The precise geometric line does not lend itself to the expression of an individual style or feelings, or to depicting the contours of objects and people. It represents only itself, so to speak, without any reference to a different kind of reality. **James Welling** calls this assertion into question, however, by presenting the geometric line as a photographic image, so that it does indeed bear a direct relation to concrete reality. Both **Fred Sandback** and **Gottfried Fabian** employ the line, suggesting spatiality in the picture with a few, deliberately chosen strokes. An important exponent of American colour field painting, **Kenneth Noland** splits the single-coloured canvas with lines that run parallel to its edges, so focusing on the format and demarcation of the pictorial surface.

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### **The Line as Contour, the Representative Line and Media Reflection**

**Hubert Schmalix** studied at the Vienna Academy in the 1970s and

belongs to the first generation of what is known as Austrian 'New Painting'. **Maria Lassnig** was an important inspiration to him, demonstrating 'that one can still paint'. While Lassnig's pictures express her own physical sensations, Schmalix uses traditional pictorial motifs such as the nude or the landscape, transforming them in terms of his own sensory experience of the world. His pictures play with beauty and love, with transience and death. Figurative painting does not have to simply reflect reality: it can also construct it. Over the course of history, it has often been used to show desirable scenes, or for enhanced representations of ideologies. In more recent forms of figurative painting this practice has been treated with irony, and the question raised as to whether an objective depiction of reality can ever be achieved. The very act of selecting a detail from reality deemed 'worthy of depiction' is based on a subjective decision. **Josef Kern** only paints people whom he respects or finds interesting, such as fellow artist **Alois Mosbacher**. Kern presents an almost cruel realism and puts our relationship with reality to the

test. Do we really prefer reality to illusion, or awareness to deception? **Katrin Plavčak** addresses the theme of the image of reality conveyed to us by new media. Our relationship with ourselves and the world is shaped by images that, for instance, are made widely accessible to the general public on the internet. Plavčak's images resemble snapshots or film stills. They reference the constant churning-out of images by the media, unlike painting, which requires a conscious decision and lengthy procedure. Every day we are confronted with a flood of images that purportedly show reality. How do we deal with them?

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## **Deconstruction of Painting, Painting Games**

The medium of painting can use paint to depict three-dimensional objects, bodies and people without itself being consciously perceived as an object in space.

**Angela Bulloch's** and **Herbert Hamak's** works challenge this by making the paint take over three-dimensional space. **Adrian Schiess's** 'Flat Works' also

extend into space: unlike his watercolours, the monochrome panels do not hang on the wall. Instead they lie on the floor, encroaching directly on the space in which we move. The immaculate surface, with no traces of paint, creates the appearance of an industrial rather than an artistic product—an aspect that can also be observed in **Gerwald Rockenschaub's** work. In contrast to the painted illusion, **Erwin Wurm** emphasises the three-dimensional body in space. The coat, which as a garment serves as a 'second skin', is stretched over a plinth and takes on an artificial, geometrically lifeless form. **Brigitte Kowan** seeks to shape the very thing that makes colour, and thus the medium of painting, possible in the first place: her material is light, which she uses to alter spaces and produce illusions. Although light can be captured in facts and figures, we can still never really 'grasp' it in our perception.