

GALERIE EVA PRESENHUBER

Jean-Frédéric Schnyder
ŒL AUF LEINWAND

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Galerie Eva Presenhuber, Waldmannstrasse, Zurich

Artist Talk with Valérie Knoll
January 19, 2024

Valérie Knoll Jean-Frédéric, we're here at your exhibition at Galerie Eva Presenhuber on Waldmannstrasse, which opens tomorrow. It's quite pragmatically titled "ŒL AUF LEINWAND." The sequence of rooms reminds me of your exhibition at the Kunsthalle Bern. When you enter, the first thing you see are the so-called "Cheap Pictures." Then you enter the other two rooms, where there are groups of paintings from 1982 to 2023. The time span of over forty years has a retrospective character. The "Cheap Pictures" are these cloth rags that you use to wipe the paint off the brushes. I know them in two forms. One is the way they "dance" here as little pictures on the walls. And second, in the form of a huge blanket sewn together from patches, as shown in the exhibition "Stop Painting" at the Fondazione Prada 2021, curated by Peter Fischli. When did you start collecting and storing these cloth rags, these "painters"? And when did you get the idea to do something with them?

Jean-Frédéric Schnyder At first, I didn't want to make a work of art out of them. I just did it. For fun or out of boredom or to pass the time. From the first picture on, I just put them aside, not with the intention of sewing them together or doing anything with them. They weren't properly disposed of; they were just lying there. Then I started sewing them together. At first, it was just one strip. And then I did it over and over again for six months. This went on for ten or twenty years until the cloth was fifteen meters long and five meters wide, or about eighty square meters.

VK Many of the titles of your paintings, also for this exhibition, are so pragmatic or almost sober. You call these paintings "cheap." That's almost a bit of an

interpretation, because on the one hand cheap means inexpensive, but it's also a bit pejorative.

JFS I mean this in terms of content—"cheap" in the sense that it doesn't cost anything to make them, and they paint themselves. You don't have to think, you don't have to have any special skills, and wonderful paintings come out of it. Of course, I did some work on them for public presentation. When I was able to sell the blanket, which actually has no value and is garbage, that was really the greatest thing for me.

VK I also remember when you were preparing your exhibition at the Kunsthalle Bern, and you told me how you wanted to do it. That was also a game of expectations, because many people see you as a "painter." Upstairs, in the hallowed halls of the Kunsthalle Bern, we had the sculptures. Then in the basement came the "Cheap Pictures," and only at the end came the large paintings, the "real art." For you, it's all the same. But there are still people who see a hierarchy in art. Sculpture. Painting. Figuration. Abstraction. Worthy. Unworthy. Diligent. Lazy.

JFS I don't believe in that anymore. I'm not a pessimist, but the truth is that, today, you can kind of pack it in with the handmade. Work done by hand is never as perfect as industrially produced products.

VK There are a lot of younger artists out there now who are dedicating themselves to painting and trying to incorporate technology into it.

JFS Well, I've stubbornly resisted the devices and digital technology all this time. But I can see that it works—as long as you have electricity.

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VK We're doing something very modern here right now: a "podcast."

JFS And I'm enjoying it. I allow myself to try something different. I think that's a luxury. But the technology doesn't always work. If something doesn't work, I can't just tighten a screw—the fault lies somewhere in the zeros and ones. When you work with a computer, you generate some kind of output from a box. You take a quick look at it, it might be funny for a moment, but then it's gone. I prefer to do what I know how to do, which is craftsmanship. You start something, you're awkward or clumsy at first, and then you learn quickly. And the best thing is that you have fun doing it. All the better when a work of art comes out of it.

VK On the one hand, you said that the "Cheap Pictures" paint themselves, but you still work a lot and systematically. You're not lazy. In your studio, I had the impression that you have a daily structure to your work, as if you were doing a regular job. You work every day; you do everything yourself, and you don't leave anything to an assistant like others do. And then you finish your work in the evening. A bit like the dream of a normal daily routine, but playful. You do what you feel like doing. What's your relationship to daily work?

JFS I never had a real studio. I've worked in the kitchen, in the bedroom, in the basement, in the coal cellar, wherever there was a little space. I always adapted to the circumstances. I also painted outside because I didn't have a studio—that is, not because I wanted to, but because I had to. It's the same with the object. I want to do something specific, and then I want to see it at some point, for example on canvas, and that's why I keep at it. But I can also sit on the sofa and watch television for a week or two. So my structure is quite "fragile." When I'm working on something I want to do, I can tear myself apart. Sometimes, I have to rein myself in a little bit, so it doesn't get out of hand.

VK Every time I call you, you're working in the basement.

JFS There's always this or that to do. I'm also the caretaker. We're two little old people with a little house. We have to help each other out, like carrying the laundry upstairs. I've never really felt like an artist. People used to ask me, "Do you have a style?" I would always flinch and answer: "No, I'm still searching." Today, I may have a style, but no one asks me about it anymore.

VK Yes, that's what characterizes your work. You're currently in a three-part exhibition of paintings that I curated at the Kölnischer Kunstverein in Cologne. And I'm getting a lot of feedback on the paintings we're showing there. For example, when people see a different painting of yours in the second part than in the first part, they're quite surprised that it is also by you. When you see them individually, it's always very surprising. I mean that in a positive way. You say you don't have a style, but I recognize you in all these works.

JFS There are so many different people and therefore so many different artists. Each working in their own way. I don't like to repeat myself, when I realize that I always end up in the same place. Maybe you save yourself by having a basic structure. You can't reinvent the world every day. There are people who have been painting a square all their lives, and it turned out well.

VK When you say that you don't like repetition, I would still like to ask you about something that has been suggested to you repeatedly, namely that your work has ironic aspects. And you've always denied that. Irony is also a relationship of distance and closeness that you have to things. For example, when you paint landscapes, still lifes, or portraits, in other words, when you paint well-known genres from the history of painting in your very own way, then you also refer to them. Or when you make art out of cloth rags with paint on them. It's all a kind of anti-genius cult act. When you approach a motif, are you looking for a rapprochement or rather a distancing?

JFS Neither. I just do it. And mostly for practical reasons. Like landscape painting when you don't have

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a studio. You occupy public space. But I've never seen it as funny or ironic.

VK I've seen a lot of still lifes. Your first painting is also a still life. What's important to you in a painting, in a motif?

JFS The things I know best are a vase of flowers, a bottle, and a glass. In painting, it's about how it's done and what exactly you can see in the painting. When it comes to abstract painting, it doesn't matter if it's representational or just about the colors. In the end, painting a picture or painting a wall is a similar creative activity, and the result is subjective and a matter of taste.

VK On closer inspection, it's not arbitrary and boundless. There are recurring elements. Occasionally a picture by another artist appears, such as Marianne von Werefkin, or there are also some with texts by Hölderlin and Walser. These works come from your immediate surroundings, your environment, and are related to your studies.

JFS I often look at paintings for a long time, whether by great or lesser masters. Even bad models serve as real studies, and I'm always amazed at what I discover when I try to copy them. It shows me how superficial my understanding can be. Even if it looks nice and I like it, when I try it myself, I experience that it's different again, and sometimes something even more beautiful comes out. It's just fun to copy. Afterwards I say: I've learned or understood something. For example, because I have trouble memorizing poems, I copy them until I think I know them by heart.

VK And you paint each object; each one gets its own appropriate representation. Which brings us back to the question of style.

JFS I'm not the master of the situation in that respect. It comes out according to my ability. I'm not very good at drawing or writing.

VK Or if something turns out badly, do you make something out of it again, like the way you keep the

cloth rags? I'm thinking, for example, of the portrait of Rudolf Steiner.

JFS I'm not very good at painting people. I try and try, and sometimes I'm lucky and get good results. I've painted Steiner several times. The last painting I did was based on a photo I found somewhere in the newspaper. I usually know all the photos of Steiner, but this one was in color, and I'd never seen it before.

VK Again, specifically about the exhibition, which I described at the beginning as a kind of retrospective. The paintings come from many decades, and I was wondering how you made the selection. Did you weight the years in a certain way, or how did you go about it?

JFS Originally, I wanted to create an unagitated exhibition here, as is usual in galleries—perhaps a little salon-like. Some still lifes are placed a little apart in the space. There are also some groups, like the landscape at the back and the word in the front. Painting letters is allowed and sometimes easier. There's also a bit of esotericism, not necessarily with Steiner, but perhaps influenced by him. The way the dawn and the angel are grouped gives the whole thing a certain atmosphere. You can do whatever you want with paintings—anywhere you can hammer in a nail, you can also hang a picture. I always try to give the audience something, maybe lead them to something without them realizing it. That's part of the fun. Doing an exhibition usually means making lists, preparing for transport, chatting, shaking hands, giving honors and bonheurs. But you also make exhibitions.

VK That also gives me the greatest pleasure. But my way of working is a little different from yours, because you work with models. I remember a particular experience at the Kunsthalle Bern. You had prepared everything; and in the end, we didn't have to change anything. It was just right.

JFS The only thing I forgot was the speech.

VK First you make a model. Then you draw pictures and sculptures in miniature, with felt pens and maybe from your head. Now, why I mention the model, there

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are two books that were published on the occasion of the exhibition. A third is in the works. They're a catalogue raisonné in three volumes. The first, "Oil on Canvas," presents the exhibition, followed by "Objects and Sculptures." Then there's the third volume. Every work is represented in the catalogue raisonné, and you drew everything yourself. That goes back to what we were talking about earlier: the control. You took this catalogue raisonné into your own hands. When did you start working on it?

JFS It turned out that I created the pictures for the exhibitions on a scale of one to twenty. This meant that I could arrange the pictures on a sheet of paper, and you could view the exhibition like a doll's house. Then I had the idea to put everything together and make a register with these small pictures. Then I copied the missing ones. Then there are plans for the objects. So I started to make a sheet for each object where I could write down measurements and other details. Then we decided to make a catalogue raisonné as a book.

VK You already had part of it, because you had already done that, and you added to it. There was also a mistake, because you didn't have all the pictures in front of you.

JFS There are some paintings where I had no idea what was on them. Then there are destroyed works that I had to remove after the fact, even though I had already included them in my catalogue raisonné. Sometimes these are things that you can't stand or that are below my own level, or that have proven to be outdated, and so on.

VK It's also a way of looking back on your entire body of work. Sometimes you hear that from other artists who have a kind of a catalogue raisonné. It's a kind of closure.

JFS Now I might as well hand in my paintbrush, as the saying goes!

VK You've often emphasized that things come out of action and situation. Conceptual painting is not just

anything, but often contains systems and orders. Was there a moment in your life when you had a clear idea of the direction you wanted your work to take?

JFS It's been up and down and back and forth. Sometimes I blame myself for not being able to see things more clearly. I admire that, and I wish I could. I became an artist because I can't take orders. I can recognize authority, but I cannot follow it myself. Sometimes I come into contact with adults, and they ask me so-called reasonable questions. Then my intellectual deficiencies are quickly revealed, and a storm erupts in my head. Are you creative? Or: What's your next project? These are terrible questions. Then I start to lie. If you don't have the will and you don't have a career plan, you don't really get anywhere. I actually like crafts, but I'm kind of lazy. And with art, I've seen that it can be the fastest way to get somewhere. You can do anything. You just have to be a bit clever. But you can't fall into the trap of genius. You don't have to be a genius from day one, you just have to see what happens. And that's how I kind of muddled through.

VK When I asked you if you were satisfied with the exhibition, you said that satisfied was a big word.

JFS An exhibition cannot give me satisfaction. To do it well is my job and my life. I don't come to a closure with it. I do this nonsense over and over again.