

Working Himself Free of the Pathos

The Topicality of Alois Mosbacher's Painting

Robert Fleck



Aftermath 1, 2009

A lamb stands in a rubbish heap. The only element in color is a lampshade. By the way, the picture is drawn in pencil. The white background – in relation to what appears to be a colorless canvas – brings its luminous effect in view of the picture's content strongly into play. One could call it a coloristic picture, although only a small part of the painting strikes the viewer as brightly colored. The picture is conceived in terms of color. A closer viewing reveals that the lines of the picture filling the canvas, carrying the image, are also not just drawn, but painted in a very particular shade of grey. There is a tension between a painting that is on the one hand obviously only drawn, and on the other a meticulously devised coloristic constellation. The white of the canvas, the grey of the lines and the yellow of the lampshade form a triad reminiscent of the great colorists in painting, producing a picture that at first glance seems unobtrusive, but whose striking effect grows. The picture in question is "Aftermath 1", a painting in Alois Mosbacher's latest series. In this picture, the lamb and the touchingly expressive look on its face assume a defining role. The application of this kind of human expressivity and emotionality to an animal's expression has been considered a "forbidden" subject in painting for around 130 years now. This kind of content can only lead to the failure of a painting, they say. Over the course of several series of paintings since the early 1990s, and particularly in the brilliant "Hunde / Dogs" series of the early 2000s, Alois Mosbacher has developed a masterful approach to this apparently impossible picture element. In the 2009 "Aftermath" series, he once again picked up on this challenge. The lamb in "Aftermath 1" (170 × 130 cm) seems almost alive, as if it would like to step out of the picture. Oblivious to itself and fascinated by the viewer, it stands in a world of catastrophe, as if nothing has happened and its life is perfectly all right. The rest of the pictorial space describes a post-apocalyptic scene. The furnishings of a house and garden have been crammed into a heap of rubbish. The bedside table is still there, the telephone and fax. A pair of sneakers lies in a jumble. On closer inspection, you see that the happy looking sheep is standing on a mattress. It is a very well drawn picture. The evident use of vertical and diagonal lines gives the picture a footing and an artistic authority that, together with its fresh substance and original style, place it within the ranks of the most exciting pictures of this new century.

Every four or five years since the early 1980s, Alois Mosbacher has produced a series of pictures that actively joined in the discussion of painting on an

international level. Over the course of time, a highly relevant body of work has evolved. The quality of painting in terms of colorism, the clear view of the link between painting and perceived themes of public opinion, as well as a personal connection with the themes and the formal means of the individual series, produce intense results that stand the test of time, as a look back at Alois Mosbacher's oeuvre over the last thirty years demonstrates.

The most important aspects can already be seen in his early works from the 1980s. Some of Mosbacher's pictures from this time are legendary icons of the new Austrian painting of this decade – a time when the colorist tradition, which had for decades met with difficulties in Austria, was suddenly once again asserted and retrospectively accepted. Mosbacher's pictures of the early 1980s played a recognizable part in this. Even then, pictures such as that depicting a swarm of bees hanging off a ladder displayed an outstanding feeling for image space, for the free use of color and for an appropriately conceived composition ultimately created for this aim, as well as for the obvious handling of subjects that do not seem appropriate for painting, which moved him and many covertly. Alois Mosbacher has displayed these qualities consistently over the decades. With the regular, internationally relevant series of pictures they have become the foundation of his oeuvre of paintings.



Mendel, 2000

In his pictures of the 2000s – which include series such as “Hunde / Dogs”, “Walker” or “Aftermath” – colorism continues: uninterrupted, but executed with new artistic means, above all building on the luminosity of the canvas, but otherwise reduced. Alois Mosbacher has always created paradoxical scenes and compositions that are only realizable with painterly means, with a certain emotional connection to contemporary life, and has made these the basis of his pictures. The directness with which he approaches life, always setting up his pictures as riddles in the Magritte tradition, as in “Aftermath 1”, was already to be seen in his pictures of the early 1980s, when painting returned to the attention of the contemporary art scene in a spectacular fashion. At the time, Alois Mosbacher was one of the few leading painters in the German-speaking world to be seriously interested in the themes that emerged in his pictures. One could in many ways see these themes as being ecological, or rather as showing non-ideological concern for the future of the planet. As hardly any other major “Junge Wilde” (young wild ones) painter from the 1980s he continued to pursue this theme in depth. Thus landscape painting remained the major territory of his oeuvre. Although wide panoramas have never featured in Alois Mosbacher's works; instead, close views have been the focus, with enigmatic constellations of objects, animals or people, a reflection of the fact that today landscape (apart from in picture postcards) that has not been “displaced” by objects and buildings is only to be found in the high Alpine region or under sea level (in the pictures of Herbert Brandl, the other Styrian landscape painter from Mosbacher's generation).

In “Aftermath”, Alois Mosbacher has remained faithful to this personal history, with a gentle, non-brutal yet uncompromising look behind the apocalypse (the collapse of human society). These continuities exist in other respects too. Alois Mosbacher's early works were also a pretext to indulge in his own love of colorism and clear composition. Furthermore the virtually naïve subject of a picture series turns out as the result of the uninterrupted relationship with the rich repertoire of themes from early and late Modernism on the one hand, and on the other hand the image world of the present day. His picture series of the last ten years from “Hunde / Dogs” to “Walkers” and “New Order” through to “Aftermath” constitute with their mixture of innovative colorism and a long-considered combination of iconographic references from painting tradition and direct observations drawn from today's

social environment, such as photos of passersby, which are shifted into a wood, some of the most enduring pictures of this decade, which was a rich decade for painting, even if this fact is not yet widely enough recognized.

Alois Mosbacher's body of work is a prime example of continuous development that is regularly reinventing itself through unpredictable steps, completely different subjects, technical upheavals and by playing with the development and retraction of color. The current exhibition of the Neue Galerie Graz highlights the fact, already demonstrated at Alois Mosbacher's 2004 Vienna Secession solo show, that the painter is one of the key Austrian painters of his generation and also one of the freshest picture creators of the past decade.

If one takes an overview of Alois Mosbacher's pictures since the 1981 topic-setting exhibition "Neue Malerei in Österreich" (new painting in Austria) at the Neue Galerie Graz organized by Wilfried Skreiner, then the continuity of this coloristic oeuvre strikes one immediately. In the 2009 "Aftermath" picture series, it seems almost as if color has been withdrawn. In our picture only the lampshade is in color, an odd, broken shade of yellow. This apparently naïvely filled area gives the picture its footing. It shifts the drawn picture into the context of painting and makes the sheep's trusting gaze from the picture surface into the object of a dialogue between painting and life. Seen from this viewpoint, the coloristic construction of this picture and the entire series becomes evident. The meticulously applied paint makes the large-format drawing, which absorbs imaginative elements, tip over into appearing as a painted canvas. The 2009 "Aftermath" series emerges as a tightrope walk between several worlds, in which the unreserved use of bright color plays the decisive role.

A look back at Alois Mosbacher's oeuvre reveals the continuity of the coloristic element as a crucial aspect. A free, uncommitted approach to color emerges as a particular quality of his pictures from the 1981 Graz exhibition through to the present day. This focus on color and its unfettered use links Mosbacher's work with that of the other major painters of his generation in Austria. In the 1980s the characteristics and distinctive features of young painters in various countries were frequently compared. These comparisons did not have a nationalistic focus. They had their justification in that the young, fresh and amazingly dynamic situation in painting in the early 1980s, experienced all over western Europe and the USA, still pointed to distinct local lines of tradition, a phenomenon worth observing. Within the rediscovery of the colorist tradition in Austria, Alois Mosbacher's paintings played a leading role.¹ His pictures also especially stuck in one's mind because the use of different bright colors in these pictures was so astoundingly uncalculated, with no regard to composition, image structure or figural situation in the picture, even if this situation in the pictures was always handled in a controlled and effortless way. Since 1981 Alois Mosbacher has been a significant voice in a strong generation of Austrian painters who have almost constantly attracted international attention and also serve as a reflection of the high standards in the teaching of art and painting in Austria in the late 1970s. Mosbacher's body of work stands out due to its particularly intense, free and imaginative brand of colorism, whereby his color painting was only possible with figures. This continuity in the close intermeshing of colorism and figuration can still be seen in Mosbacher's work today. This is why the figural appears neither as a second level nor as a pretext for the picture. In Alois Mosbacher's work the figure legitimises color and its freedom in the picture. This leads to the dialogue between figure and two-dimensionality that sustains Mosbacher's pictures.

A second important aspect of Alois' Mosbacher's work is to be found in the trail of narrative, which remains constantly perceptible, yet never really comes to fruition.

¹ See Robert Fleck, "Nouveau Colorisme Autrichien", in: *Flash Art, édition française*, Paris, October 1984

Ultimately these paintings do not tell any stories, instead deriving their inner tension from the way in which the arrangement of figures always remains on the verge of showing a possible plot. The reintroduction of the narrative element in painting and in contemporary art in general was one of the biggest art phenomena since the mid-1970s. Previous to this, classical modernism at the beginning of the 20th century had cleared out the excessive storytelling of late 19th-century art. The informal painting of the 1950s then crystallized this renunciation of narrative into a taboo, which was only further hardened by the avant-garde art of the 1960s and 1970s. From the mid-1970s, however, when Alois Mosbacher was studying, the most advanced section of avant-garde art turned against this, above all the performance artists of the late 1970s around Marina Abramovic and Laurie Anderson, who reintroduced narrative elements into the visual arts. Alois Mosbacher began his oeuvre of paintings at the start of the 1980s, in this ambivalent situation. Both narrative in visual arts and the medium of painting were suddenly acceptable again. At the same time, however, these open doors resulted in artistic strategies that in the medium term were exhausted. From the new 1980 generation, about fifteen painters survived in an international context, among them Alois Mosbacher with his series from the 2000s.



Aftermath 2, 2009

Alois Mosbacher has constantly maintained narrative on a restrained line conceived in terms of art. This narrative trail is what still creates tension in his pictures to this day. He uses it in his composition, but keeps it carefully balanced between pure painting and a narrative effect inherent to the figural. Alois Mosbacher does not try out a lot of options on the same canvas. His research into motifs is mainly carried out beforehand. He also does not make different variations of narrative elements visible or palpable in the picture in order to charge the image. Purely formal or decorative solutions are likewise of little interest to him. His paintings are about the implementation of a picture imagined and conceived in one glance, although its research, the search for the motif – simple at first glance but proving complex and enigmatic – can be a long process. This notion of painting as the implementation of a picture imagined and conceived in one glance is one that he shares with Impressionist painters. Mosbacher has always taken a lot of photographs. He also introduces this contemporary kind of study and search for motifs into his pictures. Nonetheless, he never actually paints by copying photos. He gathers complex motifs, in recent years by researching images on the Internet and using digital photography of urban and rural everyday life; motifs that can only become coherent in painting. His painting of the 2000s is in particular based on implementing the moment character of this complex pictorial concept as directly as possible, without flourishing his mastery of painting skills. In doing so Alois Mosbacher assumes a very carefully chosen position as a painter, which is also a conscious commentary on the potential role of painting at the start of the new century. This is what constitutes the actual meaning of this oeuvre. The assured figuration that Alois Mosbacher has developed plays as great a role as the free use of color and the discernible yet restrained traces of narrative.

In a third aspect the oeuvre is characterized by a self-confident distance from the modernist pictorial concept. For the generation of painters in the 1980s and 1990s, to which Mosbacher belongs, a diverse approach to the legacy of modernism was a guiding principle. For the previous generations of painters, the modernist language of form meant – and still is today – an apparently inescapable corset, within whose restrictions one can merely try to create variations. From the standpoint of the early 21st century, this difference becomes especially apparent. Alois Mosbacher was never a post-modern eclectic, approaching the modernist language of forms ironically, cynically or as an “image mixer.” His position is far more interesting



Aftermath 6, 2009

than that and could be described as a distance from the modernist pictorial concept. He knows how to unshackle his work – not from the modernist language of forms, as his paintings do contain regular reminders of it – but from the modernist understanding of the role and task of the picture. The modernist pictorial concept was carried by a claim to definitiveness of the innovative painting, by the idea that an invention of form or substance means an irreversible step. In his oeuvre, Alois Mosbacher has gradually, although one could also say systematically, worked himself free of this pathos of painting. In his pictures from the 2000s there are a number of echoes and reminders of the tradition of modernism. They are rendered without pressure, yet with noticeable commitment. The predominant feature of his work from the 2000s, however, is a realistic pictorial concept, which is aware of the competition of the new image media and seeks to seize the opportunity to offer contemporaries intriguingly mysterious pictures about the present day via an unexpected medium: painting. With regard to the various attempts to cling to painting's status as the supreme discipline, Alois Mosbacher is, along with a few other significant painters of the past decade, one of the drafters of a new role for painting within a context that has been drastically altered by digital media.

Alois Mosbacher's more recent pictures from the 2000s are clearly drier, less poetic creations. Alois Mosbacher's early painting was determined by exuberant colorism and the poetry of the visual, by two fields of hope. These have given way to a more objective style, in which social and ecological illusions no longer appear to have a place. What remains is the theme of painting as research into counter-worlds. This is the continuous theme in Mosbacher's painting. Currently it is a question of counter-worlds such as lonely walkers in the forest, the sheep in the rubbish heaps, the anonymous houses of dropouts, and so on. The pictures are fictions made from various model images, in which composition and color triumph over content. Within this context it is interesting that Alois Mosbacher's early pictures conducted similar research into counter-worlds, with the triumph of colorism and a counter-world in refuges of nature. In this way Alois Mosbacher painted some of the most significant pictures of the 1980s. The fact that he consistently manages to achieve this using a greatly altered technique makes his artistic pessimism regarding the current present striking and potent.

The "Aftermath" picture series raises another theme. To a certain extent, good painters always paint their pictures "in the aftermath", a past that lies in the future. With their slow working methods they always come "too late" compared to the reproductive visual media. This is why there are so many major paintings in art history that show, so to speak, post-apocalyptic scenes. In Mosbacher's latest pictures this factor definitely plays a role. The "Aftermath" series says that one could imagine the world in a situation where man has disappeared – a theme that has covertly occupied the artist since his work began. The picture remains Utopian and open to the future, because the free use of color triumphs over composition and the potentially pessimistic reading of the subject as such is reversed. In Alois Mosbacher's work, color has always overcome reality. Everything in the picture is important, but color remains Utopia.

