

Dieter Begemann

Memory and One Thing in Mind

The painter Martin Conrad

The Muses as ancient personifications of the arts—they can be encountered in common language use even today. But who, on the spur of the moment, can name the mother of the nine sisters who brought us art? It is Mnemosyne, the goddess of memory! A suggestive reference that possibly allows us to better understand an artist like Martin Conrad. For such references are not about submerged bits of education, but rather about a figure of thought capable of leading us into the midst of an artistic oeuvre that confidently juggles with depths and layers saturated with notions of education and memory, including those of a more remote provenance. At the same time, this work is characterised by a freedom in its combinatory style that is utterly contemporary.

The studio: the artist receives the visitor with the comment that here, “like in an Egyptian tomb”, one would have to traverse a path of winding hallways with surprising twists and turns. Although this describes the actual path through the listed historic building, it could, for the same token, mean a world of images which, departing from a dense surface, winds its way further into the depths. At the innermost coil of the snail shell, to use a biological analogy, we find ourselves in a room that is packed with all kinds of things, but clearly underlies a compelling order. Chalks sorted in cardboard boxes, tubes of paint, countless paint brushes in jars and cans, meticulously labelled colour charts and samples, in short, the tools of the trade.

Besides this: stones, a piece of brick with remains of mortar, bizarre branches and, half-obscured behind a curtain, bookshelves, or, more precisely, a proper library containing artistic but also philosophical and literary material. The atmosphere in this space somewhat reminds of an alchemistic laboratory, whose master, preferably clad in a dark jacket with a dark shirt, chooses to express himself in a quiet, unobtrusive voice, prudently yet emphatically. Wording: a visual artist who comes up with titles, such as *Felder Umschrittenwerden (Fields in Circumambulation)* for a current series, *Fünfhändige Winde (Five-handed Winds)* or, an earlier example just as wonderful, *Dionysos bis Worms*, apparently also possesses a fine sense of language, its substance and its sound.

Above all, however, Martin Conrad is an image fabulator, because titles like these may elicit ample associations, but nonetheless will not result in conclusive stories. The fields “being walked around” here reach from where we are situated, into the present, to realms of soon or back then, of never and nowhere, or to previously untrodden, in-between spaces. The path to Conrad’s country is indicated by two traces, distinct yet intertwined. Hasty brush strokes as ligatures or circling elements will form intrinsically pulsating structures, which in their oftentimes architectural quality set the pace of a calm and generous pictorial rhythm.

That is one trace. The other is more fragmented, less calm. In dark lines on the painterly structures we see: faces, details of buildings, vehicles, strange devices or patterns from some undetermined historical distance. Or are they from today? These objects are placed next to each other without any comprehensible connection. No, they rather appear to be drifting, quietly emerging from the base, changing positions in relation to one another, to then sink back. The semantic openness of the depiction is its actual *raison d'être*, the seemingly eternal variability its functional principle.

Visiting Martin Conrad, we find ourselves in a veritable cabinet of wonders, similar to those favoured in the Baroque period—one of these peculiar arrangements of *trouvailles* from the fields of the natural and the artificial. What later in the context of the Enlightenment was considered as a junk room, was really an experimental setup, an attempt to associatively come closer to what possibly ruled the world: at its core was transformation, the at all times conceivable transition from one quality or category to another. Now this is astoundingly modern, considering that today we are at a point where we ourselves are painfully experiencing the frailty of rigidly systematic categorisation... What may take its place are intuitiveness, elective affinities, associations. It is an empowerment of the senses, among which one should certainly count the seventh!

What could be more sensuous than colour? Martin Conrad has developed his own unique cosmos of colour, where the beauty of brilliant turquoise hues, the crumbly brick colours, the chalky shades of yellow are being broken in a strange manner. While they do exist, their harmonies obviously are slightly dissonant. The sensual abundance is juxtaposed with a certain unruliness. This withdraws them from a hasty, premature understanding, demands a second glance. And, not to forget, though these pictures were built from sensuous colour material, their composition is quite intentional, with vertical and horizontal structures providing the framework and architecture. Expressivity and constructivism: in his artistic approach, Martin Conrad is a historically conscious painter, who continually reflects the history of his medium and explores its possibilities to expand them in a vivid manner. A preoccupation which, in his own words, “he owes his precursors.” Colour, this should also be mentioned, is capable of creating a spaciousness of its own accord. But unlike the statically defined spaces of a construction in perspective, the colour spaces of these paintings remain fully open: their deeper layers are swinging back and forth.

And now from the colour to the line. At the basis of the linear elements is a continual drawing process, a kind of thinking in images, in which the artist initially brings onto paper what he sees and finds from the most varied sources—resulting in sheets that meanwhile fill countless archive boxes. A well-organised numbering system ensures targeted access. Yet what sounds so systematic will change to the contrary at any given moment, because the selection for a painting or drawing, instead of following content-related references, is based on associatively perceived, structural relationships between the individual motifs. We will suddenly find visual notations after artworks from the past next to the fragment of a natural

history textbook, in turn neighboured by paraphrases on a wrinkled milk carton. And, what a surprise, the more or less coincidental contours of the milk carton, without further ado, allude to the glorious ancient times of Nike of Samothrace... Martin Conrad preferably examines both the relations and the breaks between his motifs in the form of series, involving one or two years of work. He works on several paintings at the same time, accompanied by a plethora of watercolours and works on paper. Phases of non-productivity are necessary for clarification, also in the sense of reverting to matters once begun in order to enrich the repertoire of image creation.

Umgänge Überdachte (Dealings Reconsidered, 2013-2015) or Cherubinische Pfade (Cherubic Paths, 2014-2016) are new series of works. What initially seemed in opposition—the duality of a sensuous painterly style and the more intellectual quality of drawing—has become increasingly interwoven in these pictures. On both sides of the image narrative, whatever is seen and experienced descends into thoughts and emotions, touches base with what is known and the unconscious (personal as well as collective), to thereafter ascend again. The realisation is triggered by some sensuous coincidence, by the mere pleasure in the material: the thus developed open structure of the works also allows the observer to choose various paths of viewing. Not least the format appears to be motivating in this regard, as its physical presence at first creates distance, to then demand one's approximation. A picture is a corpus, which, particularly in the large formats, is clearly set off from the wall; the steles of *Station Hang (2014/15)* even stand detached from the wall. The pictures' strength arises from the combination of a sensuousness broken by structure and the intellectual realm opening up towards an unfolding of associations: Martin Conrad's muses possess both the power of memory and the openness for development!

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