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Relentless Abstraction

Rudi H. Fuchs

Actually, where the maneuverability of colors is concerned, things did go rapidly. Only about one hundred and fifty years ago, in 1872, was Claude Monet's painting *Impression: soleil levant* exhibited in Paris. Most people had no idea what to make of it - while it involved nothing other than the painter's acceptance of daylight and its *movement* in his perception of colors. A sun rising: that takes some time. The initial light that appears on the horizon is cold and still too pale to rouse colors in nature. For that matter, just as anything which is visually mysterious will at one point become the subject of painting, such circumstances (morning light emerging as color from darkness or, say, the moonlit night) have also turned up in beautiful paintings by Caspar David Friedrich, for example, or Philipp Otto Runge. But in their work such observations in nature were frozen motionless and captured in the image. In his masterly painting Monet approached the gradual onset of early light by way of that slow movement - until the first reflections of sunlight appear in the initially atmospheric blue (the painting's main color) while, at the same time, a faint pink spreads throughout it. In order to paint those effects of color in changing light, he needed to invent a different form of *peinture*. That was the nimble, impressionistic brushstroke which never defines forms with a fixed contour. The colors remained strangely fluid. They were liberated.

As for the outspoken ways in which they were later manifest in modern art, I'll leave that aside for now.

But when Jan Dibbets began, around 1970, after first having worked in black-and-white, to use color photography as well, there were quite a few at the time who considered this an extravagance. His work had been classified as 'conceptual art' and was also being referred to as 'minimal' by some - belonging in the great tradition of abstraction. In his renowned perspective corrections we see, in a photograph, a rigid square surfacing in a meticulously constructed optical *distortion* of another geometric figure (a trapezoid). An effect of photography. As a distinct form, that oddly taut square corresponded to the surface of the photograph. It refused to participate in normal perspective. This 'correction' was regarded as an intelligent exercise in radical geometric abstraction, with which other contemporaries were concerned as well. Although it is difficult to describe exactly, what we see in terms of the image is, while initially enigmatic, ultimately clear as day. In the sensibilities of that time, the early seventies, such precise geometric works had to be black-and-white. That was part of their style - it moreover gave them the ultimate *purity*, I heard people say back then. The effects of color in combination with this were too confusing.

Those works, however, were not at all about their construction (that was just an *anecdote*) but about that inimitable effect of what I call *tightening*. With this Dibbets had discovered a remarkable visual quality that began to play its own distinct role in his art - particularly in his unique, abstract designs of color. Most recently he then inevitably came in contact with digital possibilities for generating colors which, in a certain sense, do not occur in nature or, if they do, only by some fluke. Take the recent studies: each is a collage of two photographs. The fourteen photographs that make up the

entire series are manipulations of *the same* photograph from 1976 - a classic (Kodak) color photograph showing the body of a car. Actually, though, the new colors appear out of nowhere. In the *Colorstudies* of that time, produced with such photographs, the tightening was brought about due to their precise, square perimeter. Many found these works intolerably austere and intolerably abstract as well. Now Dibbets has been able, by continuing on the same road, to fathom more deeply into the unfathomable nature of color. When two solid colors appear alongside each other, one is bound to have a stronger optical effect than the other. Yet in these chromatic diphthongs, the colors are conceived in such a way that they maintain a perfect balance with each other and *jointly* make up an incomparably taut square. These constructions are not beautiful in the sense of an impression by Monet. They're too ruthlessly abstract for that. The works need to be strict, in order to express the indescribable element shown in them.

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