

Flower Revelations (“Neues von Blumen”)

von Julia Dold

One of the surprising conclusions revealed by the 2005 Fondation Beyeler exhibition entitled “Blumen-Mythos”¹ (flower myth) was that flower motifs in modern and contemporary art have played a significant role up until the present day. But why are artists fascinated by this rather sweet motif and what happens to the flower when it meets the radical nature of modern and contemporary art? These were two of the questions that accompanied the conception of this exhibition, and will also be addressed by new and, in part, unseen works shown in Eva Rosenstiel’s exposition. Both exhibitions illustrate the vital importance of the motif, even in the present day, despite the fact that it has long since lost its allegorical role and is no longer used to provide evidence of artistic refinement and mastery in still lifes or flower pieces. The flower has taken on new significance in modern and contemporary art, however, first and foremost in the works of Vincent van Gogh, who experimented with flowers in his paintings. For him, and many artists after him, the flower became a symbol of his personality and emotional states – aspects that can also be found in Eva Rosenstiel’s works. A few important themes surrounding the flower motif have run through all ages, however. The flower still remains a symbol of transient, and vain, beauty (vanitas), and still represents the archaic, closely related topics of beauty, eros and death. Even today, sculptors, installation and video artists, photographers and painters are still dealing with the flower motif in their works, drawn in by the pure pleasure of the flower’s beauty, its lavishness and even the sensuality evoked by the riots of color.

In this exhibition, for the first time, Eva Rosenstiel focuses on the floral motifs she has worked on over the last few years. She showcases a vivid, bright and airy bouquet of painted-over photographs and paintings and – to provide a certain contrast – black and white drawings with organic shapes, complemented by vases filled with “anthyllis” motifs, which Eva Rosenstiel created for an artistic edition at Majolika Manufaktur Karlsruhe. With its focus on these particular groups of works, this exhibition provides an intimate insight compared with the artist’s entire collection. Those who have seen at least a few of Eva Rosenstiel’s exhibitions in Freiburg over the last few years will be able to imagine the varied, vast and ever expanding and diversifying body of work that the artist has created over the last twenty years. It is not only the sheer volume and vast range of works produced during this time that is impressive, but also the determination with which Eva Rosenstiel expands on, varies and explores artistic issues in her series until she feels that she has fully dealt with a topic or motif. She then continues working on this topic or motif at a later point, experimenting with other connections, formats, materials and techniques with her own playful, and often humorous, approach.

She shares her love of (mostly small format) series with her mentor Professor Peter Dreher, and certainly also her interest in landscape and floral motifs and the necessity of everyday – ordinary – artistic works. There are few days when Eva Rosenstiel does not paint. With her unique artistic style and the new, never-before-seen incorporation of photography in her works, however, she has taken a consistent and extremely unique route, not only enriching the artistic landscape of our region, but also providing an exciting contribution to a new understanding of, and new links between, photography and painting, individual pictures and series, and copies and originals.

Photographs shot with a 35 mm camera and developed into 10 cm x 15 cm photographs (“paradise format”) form the starting point of almost all of her works. She finds her motifs when hiking in the countryside or strolling in town – taking pictures of everyday life, unspectacular views of fields and gardens, house facades and shop windows. The artist then adds touches of paint to these prints based on the range of shapes and colors in the photographs. These small-format works in “paradise format” now form an archive of hundreds, or even thousands, of edited photographs, from which Eva Rosenstiel consistently selects motifs that she continues to work on using other formats and different artistic techniques. These may also be used as a template for an oil painting that is not just “copied”, but, in turn, is supplemented or transformed by paint. In fact, Eva Rosenstiel generates a complex, self-referential system that keeps on developing like a picture puzzle and confronts attentive viewers with irritating questions: Which parts of these pictures represent reality? What is reality, what is illusion and what is pure abstraction? To what extent do the photographs reflect reality? When and how did the artist intervene? And what influence do painting and art in general have on our perception of reality?

These are the questions that directly spring to mind when viewing works that contain artistically modified photographs, although this manipulation is not always clear in the first instance, such as in the series “Jardin des Plantes” or “Wonderland”. For these works, Eva Rosenstiel took photographs from an insect’s perspective using a small mirror painted with blobs of bright colors and placed in a garden. As a result, the plants in this series are not actually responsible for the array of colors, bright range of flowers and vividness perceived by the viewer, as these did not appear in reality, but were inserted by the painter with simple, bright daubs of color. Only on close inspection do we discover where the view in the mirror stops and where “reality” truly begins.

The same process of manipulating photographs when they are shot also forms the basis of the series “Août”, in which black and white photographs are edited with soft or pastose oil coatings. It also provides the foundation for the recent work entitled “Neues von Blumen” (flower revelations), where the artist’s fragmentation of the motifs is more radical and the interconnection of photography and painting is more multilayered – to the extent that painted and photographed plant motifs and daubs of colors can only be distinguished upon in-depth inspection. The process is complex. Eva Rosenstiel starts by covering individual parts of the pictures on the photographic template (a process that she has also applied to other small-format series shown in this exhibition using other materials) and then edits these photographs. This method gives rise to impressive, colorful compositions that appear as if floating, and contain abstract and naturalistic elements as well as photographed and painted motifs, which Eva Rosenstiel completes by adding contrasts in oil color in order to create a balance in the overall piece.

With a twinkle in her eye, Eva Rosenstiel not only draws reference to these recent works with her exhibition title “Neues von Blumen”, but also to Walter Benjamin, who used this title for his review of the book published by Karl Bloßfeldt “Urformen der Kunst. Photographische Pflanzenbilder”²(Art Forms in Nature. Photographic

Pictures of Plants), as well as to the book itself, which changed fundamental perceptions of the flower and revolutionized photography. This book was published in 1928. 16 years before, Walter Benjamin lived on Kirchstraße in Freiburg – just a few steps from the Galerie Claeys – where he completed his studies in philosophy, German literature and psychology at the University of Freiburg. To get to the university, he had to walk past the building in which the gallery is now located.

While the “blue ribbon of spring”³ won't quite be fluttering in the breeze when the exhibition opens, the white snowdrops and yellow winter aconites lining the front gardens on Kirchstraße will whet our appetite for the resounding splendor of colors and shapes that will be brought by spring and summer and are portrayed so impressively by Eva Rosenstiel in this exhibition.

1 Blumenmythos. Von Vincent van Gogh bis Jeff Koons, published by Fondation Beyeler, 2005

2 Walter Benjamin, Kritiken und Rezensionen. Gesammelte Schriften – Band III, printed by Hella Tiedemann-Bartels, 1991

3 Eduard Mörike, from the poem “Der Frühling lässt sein blaues Band...” (Spring lets its blue ribbon...)