

Klaus Merkel - mews

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Learning to read Klaus Merkel's world of images

As puzzling as Klaus Merkel's new cycle of works presents itself, the associated exhibition title *mews* must seem to non-native English speakers. However, this unspeakable string of letters, known to English-speaking readers as a term for stables that were converted into living spaces, presents a first hint for deciphering the motifs of the new cycle.

Klaus Merkel refers to himself - again - by returning to his artistic beginnings and following on from the motif language of his *Tiere* cycle of the late 1980s. He repeats - albeit with a much stricter grid - the crossed canvases, the not quite so monochrome color surface underneath and the fragmented, seemingly steering black figurations that threaten to tear up their ground. The individual canvases seem like pieces of a puzzle. If Merkel tries to bring the fragments back to their original form, he thwarts our plans, because we are denied the final form.

The new works are expressive and playful. Terms that have long not been associated with Merkel's artistic practice, because his infamous catalogue pictures seemed the sheer opposite: at the beginning of the 1990s he showed over 500 miniatures on a scale of 1:10, on seven free-standing panels, presenting his painting production between 1988 and 1995. His originals became copies, the individual work became a fragment and creation turned into system. A catalogue of works without any distinction between system and invention, which was unsettling, because Merkel did not reveal his principles of order.

Klaus Merkel's modular language - his sample book - becomes a tool that produces future cycles such as *Master Slave System* (2010): complex visual works, difficult to decipher, with countless levels that reminisce about our digital everyday life. Overtaxed we try to decode the systems surrounding us, occasionally small parts open up, but we are denied the view and understanding of a bigger picture.

While past cycles captivate us with the interplay of close-up and distant effects, the new, (yet old) group of works is characterized by its fast reading. It is precisely here that the unique aspect in Merkel's practice manifests itself: time and again we search for the solution to the riddle in his works using a wide variety of methods. The temptation to crack the code is great. Layer by layer we learn to decipher Klaus Merkel's world of images and must first learn to read again. Sometimes fast, sometimes slow, sometimes simple, sometimes complex, but always challenging.

His artistic practice is self-dependent, takes steps forward and backward, thus becoming timeless. He creates a world of images that will be read differently by every generation. As Klaus Merkel states in an interview with Susanne Titz (Director, Museum Abteiberg, Mönchengladbach): "I have been working retrospectively for years: I take up familiar motifs, motif complexes or whole pictures, paint pictures with pictures, and older inserts can be integrated into new pictorial inventions.

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Their chronology, their biography and all forms of nostalgia have to be dissolved. I look back, repeat and ignore dating or location - when and where this or that motif appears for the first time - it's uninteresting! My motives, my tools. Material is shifted, it is subject to copy strategies and motif wanderings. This negates time and liberates."¹

Marianne Dobner

¹ „*Master Slave System (afterglow)*. Verfügungsmodelle von Malerei, Wiederaufführung der Ausstellung und neugefasster Werkbegriff. Klaus Merkel und Susanne Titz im Gespräch“, in: Till Julian Huss und Elena Winkler (Hrsg.), , Berlin 2017, pp. 135-160, here p. 146.