

A Vast Land

A cup is not a cup, is not a cup, is not a cup.

Instead, it is its own reflection, it is a reflection of the surrounding room, it is the light that it reflects, it is its own shadow as well as the shadow it casts on other objects. It is a form that was designed at a certain time in a certain region by certain people under certain circumstances.

It is made of faience, porcelain or plastic. Out of a material that was manufactured at a certain time in a certain region by certain people under certain circumstances. A cup is the texture of the room that surrounds it. It is the season and the day and the hour in which it appears. Within it is contained an infinity of relationships and conditions. A cup holds the world and a picture of a cup holds the image of that world.

A child draws and paints people, animals and things in order to gain power over them – just like a Paleolithic hunter. Because we own what we are able to capture in a picture. And therefore, the depiction of a single cup is the appropriation of the whole world. Appropriation of the world through representation: this can be said of all realistic art. But realistic art always has two aspects: it both *represents* and it *creates*. A realistic picture at once *signifies* something and *is* something.

I recognize what makes an artist special and individual by the way meaning and being, i.e. the conscious and unconscious, subject and form, relate to one other. In the images of Petra Levis, the following special features are conspicuous:

Petra Levis has not retreated from the discovery of nonrepresentational art; rather, she has taken up its formal achievements and worked through them in her art. Unlike the classic realists who distinguish between important and less important objects by painting the one more and the other less meticulously, the one in a more formalized manner, while merely sketching the other, Petra Levis renders everything visible in her pictures on the same level of abstraction: foreground and background, main subject and secondary subjects. No element is favored or placed at a disadvantage by being given either a heightened or more summary treatment.

This uniformity in the degree of abstraction, the equal treatment and equal value given to all parts of the picture surface, is coupled with a transformation of the objects depicted into abstract surfaces. The image can be seen as at once representational and nonrepresentational. This is why it is not important in terms of the formal composition of the picture if objects are seen in whole or only in part, if they are bisected or cut off by the picture frame.

Also noticeable in these pictures is that, despite the perfection of their realism, one is able to see *how* they are made. This is the artist's intention. The viewer should upon closer observation be able to discern that this is indeed painting and not a technical method of reproduction. While impressed by the representational quality of the rendering, the spectator nevertheless remains fully aware of the method of its making and thus maintains a certain distance and freedom in his perception of the artwork. In this respect, the choice of a watercolor technique that is transparent in both senses of the word is the consequence of an artistic concept: these images represent, they do not imitate.

Petra Levis's painting is realistic, but it is not photorealism. A realistic picture depicts real objects. A photorealistic picture depicts a photo that represents objects. Photorealism is actually a picture within a picture. Petra Levis does not start with photos of photographed objects, but with real objects.

The painter begins each of her projects by working out a thorough concept, and this *script* prescribes all further working steps. Her artistic work thus begins long *before* brush meets paint. She chooses the objects she paints according to theme, puts them together and then positions them very carefully. The fall of light and the shadows produced are likewise not the result of coincidence, but rather appear before us in the final image exactly as the artist intended.

Pictorial composition and framing, angle of vision, lighting, aperture: these concepts bring to mind the construction of a film still. And, as a matter of fact, Petra Levis's pictures are inspired by film. This applies in particular to her various series of individual images that together constitute a plot. An intriguing example of the influence of film back on painting.

Of course, art does not come about in a cultural no-man's-land. Art always comes from art, and painting always relates to painting that has gone before. Petra Levis draws on the work of the American realists (from Winslow Homer to Wayne Thiebaud), not only due to biographical or aesthetic predilections or correspondences, but also in terms of the pragmatic attitude the artist takes to her occupation. Hers is an art that, with all of its aesthetic elaboration, accepts reality as it is.

Michael Haussmann, 2007