

Brigitte Huck

# Snakeskin jackets and painting

Hubert Scheibl's studio is located on Burggasse in the seventh district of Vienna, where the street, rising from the center of the city, has reached a certain level of elevation. The top floor of the six-storey house affords a panoramic view across the roofs of Vienna, from the Kahlenberg hill in the North to the Danube Tower, a landmark in the East - a sight that only Americans have the right word for: wow!! The backdrop of the city in cinemascope often informs Scheibl's pictures because, as he says, he always has to be better than the view.

Working up there has an effect. Having an unimpaired view all around is liberating. The bustling built-up area of Vienna, with its narrow, meandering streets downtown and drab nineteenth-century tenements on the outskirts, is somewhere down there, in some huge basement; you can forget about it when the wind whistles through the roofbeams.

The wind also blows through Scheibl's new pictures. First of all, they emanate energy. Energy as the driving force of change and as the confirmation of a visual truth, a correctness in sensory and emotional

terms, which to him is the opposite of intellectual correctness. In the context of an abstract tradition Scheibl defines the parameters of non-representational painting as new insights, a changed perception of reality, which "leads from an object-centered, static, perspectival view to an a-perspectival, dynamic, energetic perception of nature and reality".<sup>1</sup> His visual strategies tackle precisely the spots where the lacunae are identified in the system, order and schematic approach of our mind, which is prone to hermetic thinking, and where the conscious and the subconscious meet in the shielded angle of reflection. Gerhard Richter's definition of abstract painting as "fictitious models illustrating a reality we can neither see nor describe, but the existence of which we can deduce"<sup>2</sup> applies to Scheibl's pictures, as does Barnett Newman's contempt for formalism, dogmatic attitudes as well as the episodic and anecdotal.

It requires precision and honesty to position works in a field that appears to have been explored down to the last nook and cranny. Postmodernism has reduced avant-garde claims to absurdity, which



NADU-K, 1993, Öl/Laud., 200 x 175 cm; Courtesy Galerie Ropac





*SPLITTING-1, 1992/93, Öl/Lwd., 80 x 80 cm; Courtesy Galerie Ropac*

does not make it easier to detach oneself. As Scheibl says, questions must be posed within one's work, within the system, and each answer creates new systems to be rejected, reformatted, reformulated so one takes a detour to finally arrive at a change. Scheibl's current system is reductive and goes slow. It opens up via many flat layers of paints which he applies on the canvas with a spatula.

He often works on one picture for many months, putting it away and returning to it to add more paint; he lies in wait for the picture to keep in touch with it, he observes it from a distance that is emotionally charged. The completed pictures show very well how the factor of time makes the act of painting an event. The various layers of paint flash up

under the smooth surface, mix in a space that is at the same time diverse and impossible. The free painterly play, enabling seemingly endless concentrations of paint, traces of color on paint, generates an anti-metaphoric paraphrase of the medium of painting, all with the intention not to let the pictures be considered the illustration of an idea. The pictures are to evolve on their own, not to be composed, calculated or planned. The point of departure is painting as a phenomenon, painting as an indeterminate act which only becomes real as it takes shape, as one out of many approaches is formulated in specific terms, as painting itself. Painting as an attempt to test the possible forms of what painting can still be. Richter says that he has no motive, only a motivation, and this is

IMBAT-C, 1992/93, Öl/Lwd., 200 x 150 cm





One could talk about the sound of colors, the pulsations and vibrations of the picture surface, of beauty, sublimity, light, flowing, melting, substance

the medium as a site of artistic intentions, a center-whatever shape or form, but on the independence of painting. The focus is no longer on ontological terms by paints and what he can attain in ontological terms by point is no longer what he paints or how, but why he lings. Today, Scheibl does the exact opposite: the ting, interpreting reality, fantasies, symbols or feeling, remained outside the referential framework of painting, they always were formulated in abstract terms, they always their content. Even though their subject-matters they have the qualities of a narrative and relate to

The thick, pasty strokes in the pictures dating from the mid-eighties are bound to material, tamount to a quantum jump.

approach - considering painting as a concept - is tantamount to a quantum jump. approval clearly shows that Scheibl's current very of painting and young painters found euphoric Scheibl's early works from the days when the rediscovery of painting and their cornucopia of visual poetry, a look back on their subdued shades, their highly sensitive colorism emotionally charged pictures of the nineties with Given the flat, empty and at the same time

ments about the medium from there. rence of painting and to arrive at objectifiable state-city, the will to move within the framework of reference we also find in Hubert Scheibl - his tena-

*SPLITTING-2, 1992/93, Öl/Lwd., 80 x 80 cm; Courtesy Galerie Koper*



NADU-G, 1993, Öl/Lwd., 200 x 175 cm; Courtesy Galerie Ropac





For Scheibl, who considers pictures as fictitious models that include the unknown and the undetermined in terms of potential, film is consequently the most significant art form of our century. "In movies, one can identify most clearly, even more clearly than in art, how reception and visual readability change and expand in a given period."<sup>4</sup> In David Lynch's "Wild at Heart" and Quentin Tarantino's "Reservoir Dogs" Scheibl finds parallels to his work: the double codes and the meta-level, the reflection on the language of film per se, the engagement with what the medium can achieve. The subtle representation of the surface which conceals many things, multiple layers of action, highly variegated moods and overtones created by the (secret) painter Lynch are closer to Scheibl's intentions than the Austrian Informal Art of the fifties and sixties historians like to graft on the younger generation of abstract painters. A comparison of Hubert Scheibl's and David Lynch's views of the world results in a fine pattern of common characteristics. The disruptions are a case in point, both paintings and film tend to throw the spectator off kilter, both are characterized by amorphous elements, "groundlessly" interspersed color/frames, emotionality that originates from (color) sounds, light and movement. They both use visual irritation and shrug off the arguments of fundamentalists who believe that one can bear openness by true logic.

"My snakeskin jacket", Sailor says in "Wild at Heart", "Did I ever tell you that it is a symbol of my individuality and my belief in personal freedom?" One doesn't have to look for Hubert Scheibl's snakeskin jacket for long.

Translation: Elly Frank-Grossbner

Notes:

- (1) From an interview with Wolfgang Drechsler in: W. Drechsler, *Ansichten, Residenz Verlag Salzburg*, 1992, p. 184.
- (2) Gerhard Richter, *Bilder*, DuMont Verlag Cologne, 1986, pp. 55-56.
- (3) From an interview with Ulli Moser in: *Kunstforum International* 120, 1992, p. 306.
- (4) *Ibid.*, p. 311.

and emptiness, of nothingness perhaps and what lies beyond. Hubert Scheibl's pictures are seductive, and that is why he has to introduce calculated disruption, sharp-edged, shocking white stripes in a midnight blue universe, intransigent scratches, scribbles on perfect surfaces. When he uses a brush, which he rarely does, he only needs it to draw vertical stripes through the paint with a swiping gesture. The dimensions of Scheibl's pictures have grown larger, they occupy more space to provide room for expanding colors. Spatial installations of paintings assigned to one another in pairs which can be recombinated according to the respective situation function on the basis of color sounds, a dialogue of colors and their vibrations. Scheibl has stuck to the principle of multipartite works since the eighties, applying it within one picture or to series of works the proportions of which revert to human measure and clearly contribute to the architecture of a space.

Scheibl refuses to replace art by ideology. For him, painting has a reality of its own, a very specific one constituted by the process of painting. At first, there is no way of saying what the picture will eventually look like; the outcome becomes more and more concrete in the course of work as the changing canvas is continuously probed in the open space between artist and work. Thus, a vague idea is transformed into a concrete option, a reality that can be grasped and has validity for a brief period of time. The driving force behind this art is the strategy of questioning, which makes it exciting, incalculable and up to date. Research is made intuitively and empirically at the same time, and the artist himself describes it as an "exploratory movement approaching unknown fields of energy".<sup>3</sup> He engages in reflection on his medium. On the one hand, he wants to see painting qua painting, to utilize all the potentials of the medium to the full. On the other hand, he also wants to introduce a meta-level on which the medium is called into question, where the language of painting is reflected on, where the rifts are traced, the inbetween is probed and the metabolism of reality and difference is explored.

NADU-C, 1994, Öl/Lwd., 200 x 200 cm

