

Press release:

Birgit Antoni - SLINGBALL

12. 05. - 01. 07. 2007

Opening: 12.5. – 6 h. p.m.

“SLINGBALL”

In the 1980s and 1990s a new fondness for ornamentation could be observed in abstract art. Indeed, ornament advanced to become the key concept in the renaissance of painting and installational art – as could be seen in the work of Jonathan Lasker, Christopher Wool, David Reed and John Armleder, to name but a few.

The exemplary and vibrant paintings of the younger generation have begun to replicate and adopt the dynamic compositions of classical Modernism in the form of ornamental shapes. This procedure established itself under the name of “appropriation”. Recent abstractionism has consciously returned to the heroic era of the pioneers, while simultaneously giving it an ornamental twist that conveys certain doubts about the Modernist project. As Markus Brüderlin has noted in his trailblazing study on *Ornament and Abstraction*, the result has been a dialectic between ornament and the avant-garde, in which the stylistic aspect of art becomes more prominent and abstraction turns “ornamental” the moment the avant-garde impulse disappears. This relationship between the dwindling of the utopian impetus and ornamentalism can, according to Brüderlin, be conveyed by the formula ABSTRACT PAINTING minus AVANT-GARDE = ORNAMENT – to which he adds that the avant-garde’s one-sided progress-oriented dynamism and the dogma of *nouveauté* receive a dialectic corrective in the form of ornament. One could further say that ornament queries the postulate of the “purity” and aesthetic utopianism of Modernism as well as of the generations of artists in the 1960s and 1970s. Globalization and new technologies have presented a new challenge to the artistic sensibility.

We want to investigate this truly fascinating aspect of contemporary art in the exhibition “Schleuderball” [Slingball] by exploring the approaches taken by two women artists. The European Birgit Antoni and the U.S. American Polly Apfelbaum belong to the same

generation of artists. Birgit Antoni nowadays works purely as a painter, while Polly Apfelbaum chiefly devotes herself to floor installations and wall pieces that reference painterly approaches.

Of noticeable importance to both artists is a reappraisal of the classics of Modernism, as well as of artists from the 1960s and 1970s. At the same time, their works raise the question of whether the ornamental allows us a better understanding of the ways in which other cultures think and feel.

Paintings by Birgit Antoni

The basic elements of Birgit Antoni's paintings are circles and their intersections. Often the overlaps between the circles, which she describes by hand, are more prominent than the circles themselves. Antoni's paintings are built up from a number of layers of paint to produce a complex, dynamic structure with an ornamental vitality and a fascinating feeling of three-dimensionality. A great potential for motion lies in the beautifully painted curves and the oscillating interplay of the different layers. In the very moment one begins to get engrossed in the paintings a subtle play of spatial vibrations sets up. The great fascination exerted by Birgit Antoni's paintings lies in the range of variation in the different arrangements of circles, which generate the baffling swings between positive and negative, and between form and interspace. The eye leaps from one color field to the next, both on the surface as well as backwards and forwards in the works' elastic, moving third dimension, which gives a powerful impression of depth.

Born in 1956 in Cologne, the artist initially made her name with animated films, an activity that her current work does nothing to hide. With their rhythmic layerings, Antoni's paintings convey the changing phases of a composition in constant transformation.

Birgit Antoni's art constitutes a highly interesting position in the light of the current renaissance of ornamentalism that is to be observed not only in the visual arts, but also in design and architecture.

The exhibition at the Mönchehaus Museum will feature a number of new works by the artist. All in all a total of 40 paintings will be exhibited, while a large screen projector will show a selection of the artist's animations for the first time in twenty years.

POLLY APFELBAUM - Bubbles

Parallel to the works by Birgit Antoni, the Mönchehaus Museum will also dedicate a special section of the exhibition to Polly Apfelbaum's large-scale floor installation "Bubbles" (approx. 4m in diameter) from the year 2000. The U.S. American artist belongs to the same generation as Birgit Antoni, and her works have likewise an ornamental character. In recent years, Polly Apfelbaum's floor installations have become her signature pieces. The artist cuts hundreds of small, organic-looking shapes from stretch velvet, steeps them in dye, and arranges them into waves of color on the floor according to an exact plan. The colors and the circular or mandala-like arrangement in floral patterns – a nod to all that is associated with femininity, softness, beauty, purity, innocence, and simultaneously infinity – come across as psychedelic and dizzying. Polly Apfelbaum is not afraid of the beauty of form or the luminous power of color: "I wanted the work to be... as sexy and hallucinogenic as possible," as the artist put it in a much-quoted statement. Her work allows a great variety of interpretation, ranging between high and popular art. Echoes of American Color Field Painting or Abstract Expressionism, Minimal Art or Matisse's silhouettes are every bit as evident as those from Feminist Art or the arts and crafts. Typical of her work is the unorthodox manner in which it appropriates, recasts and rewrites. The titles for the works are often taken from pop songs, whose emotional, intuitive components are a source of interest for the artist. Polly Apfelbaum wants to counter purely intellectual art with a bright, colorful art that sends our senses reeling.

Translation: Malcom Green