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Translation: Prof. Wilhelm Gauger, Berlin

Editing: Richard Bertelsmann, Cape Town

Christian Heinrich (born in 1957) had already studied history of art, archaeology and journalism when further studies at the University of Arts in Berlin provided the decisive impetus for his artistic career. Of particular interest to him was the overlap and dynamic interaction between the visual arts and the theatre - a focus which he developed in several joint projects with the dramatic author Heiner Müller. For several years Heinrich lectured stage design, stage technology and puppet theatre at Berlin's University of Art, during which time he conceptualised and curated several exhibitions.

As a painter Christian Heinrich uses a highly pronounced and polished visual language of his own invention. His work has been on show in numerous individual and group exhibitions since 1987, both in Germany and abroad.

At first glance Heinrich's collages in oil paint appear to be two-dimensional. However, on closer inspection the spectator becomes aware of a subtle spaciality - a kind of arrested movement on the surface of the paintings, as it were. Several layers of deckle-edged paper, canvas, or wood are applied to a flat base. These materials differ in thickness, quality, and texture and range from thin tissue or rice paper via transparent parchment and solid deckle paper right through to thick African elephant-dung paper. Preserving traces of their raw materials and production processes, these hand-made papers have been variously watered, drenched in oil or steeped in glue and dried in several different ways or even torn, crumpled and partly burnt by the time they find their definitive place in a composition. By these processes clod-like or insular-looking strata of paper emerge from the base, layer by carefully crafted layer.

Once the layers have been stuck to the canvass, either side by side or one above the other, Heinrich applies paint. The paint may link adjoining layers as a homogenizing coat, or it may accentuate the relief-like structure of overlaps between layers. The surface is subsequently subjected to further treatment by scraping or scratching, leaving it rougher or smoother. Parts which are still moist and malleable may either be shifted together more closely, or stretched further apart to the point of tearing. The spatial dimension is thus complemented by a unique surface structure, with textural differences suggesting matter which is variously liquefying or solidifying, dissolving or crystallizing, coagulating or becoming encrusted. Surfaces strike the viewer as smooth or rough, malleable or resistant, oily or powder-dry. Processes of genesis, evolution and decomposition are hinted at - a covert yet apt allusion to the transitory nature of things and the passage of time.

Contrasts and colours interact in a playful, yet controlled way to transform these seemingly amorphous canvass-scapes into perceptively and purposefully constructed compositions. Emphasis on the horizontal dimension is a recurrent feature of Heinrich's paintings, achieving dominance in some of his later work. Square-shaped or oblong blocks, dovetails and mutually enveloping forms create solid, restful structures, all held together in a closed contour. This latter serves not merely as outline, but constitutes a boundary or frame, created from the artist's raw materials in the way set out above. This apparent stasis is unsettled by the dynamic, even violent intrusion of slanting lines, by evanescent flashes bursting into unconfined spaces, and by volcanic matter shattering the borders of closely circumscribed fields.

In the large-scale works of the later period with their bold, large blocks, fascinating colours play an important and unifying role. The secret of their vibrant energy resides not so much in colour contrasts, but rather in their concentration, mood, and mutual intensification. Radiant flashes of yellow and glowing streaks of orange frequently intersect the earthy realm of browns, beiges and greys. Red hues span the whole spectrum from blazing purple to mature violet, while shades of blue vary from light water-blue to the almost-black velvet of a moonless night. Pure, clear tones alternate with blurred areas of uncertain colouring. In the later pictures, which allude to travels in Africa, the colours become more intense, but not necessarily more cheerful or gaudy.

Abstract forms and fields of colour combine to evoke imaginary landscapes, however far these may be removed from any identifiable locations. The structures of the paintings, the textures and colours of the surfaces suggest geo-morphological processes and elementary transformations. The titles Christian Heinrich gives to his works are suggestions full of imaginative allusions, but they are by no means intended to impose restrictive interpretations. Essentially, Heinrich's paintings do not project symbols by the "traditional" means of lines, shapes, and colours. What symbolic meaning there is, resides in the very materiality of these paintings - the papers, paints, and other substances used in their creation.

Not all of Christian Heinrich's creations inhabit this imaginative field. His new series of African pictures, for example, renders topography at several levels simultaneously. Recurrent - and thus central - motifs may be interpreted as signs, but in their identifiably African texture and materiality, they evoke a definite context. In their forms and colours, these paintings allude to landscapes, and - like playing-cards - they present themselves both as images and as symbols. What sets them apart from the serial arbitrariness of playing-cards, and what guards them against mere ornamentality or formalism, is their original power of visualisation, which in turn is intimately embedded in their materiality.