

A painter tracing life

(Editorial Dr. Christel Heybrock

Katalogue: Dietmar Brixy. Paintings and Installations. 2004-2006)

He has never been one of those people who without much thought dip their hands into colour pots and not caring what the result might be wipe their dripping fingers on the canvas. But neither does he care for the other extreme of constant calculation and fussy control. For Dietmar Brixy consideration and spontaneity are no opposites. It is not surprising that before and while he is painting a process takes place which he can only partially understand rationally: There is earnest questioning and careful, yet urgent probing into the energy behind objects and living things to find out which forces shape the visible world.

It was already in the eighties that Brixy developed a canon of motifs for this exploratory work which is still valid despite many variations. For him ladder rungs e. g. are symbols of progress and development, sometimes transforming themselves into the spirals of growth of shells signalling concentric rather than linear growth, no ascent but rather maturing round one's own self. With their anthropomorphic bodies geckoes remind us of archaic origins and relationships. Fishes, birds, the shadows of human figures – all this is interwoven in the layers of colour which are superimposed onto each other and into which Brixy also often draws fine parallel wave lines with a comb: signs of life in darkly coloured spaces with reflections showing up here and there; the painter as the guide who lets the observer dive into a deep sea where floating water plants and tender tentacles merge with drifting human bodies who are still in search of their destination. Incidentally, in the nineties Brixy has actually been on diving trips himself, the trip to Malaysia even resulting in a whole cycle of paintings. He indicated once that diving to him also means exploring his own depths.

Another aspect of him – his special relationship with plants – was not immediately turned into a subject of his paintings. The yard of his former studio in the heart of Mannheim was full of overflowing plant pots, luxurious pot plants and plants growing on the walls not to speak of the botanical richness of his kitchen and living room up in his apartment – unthinkable that Brixy could be without plants. How deeply his interest in these particular living beings is rooted in his personality has only surfaced since he has owned the old Pumpwerk where he can shape his personal environment the way he intends to rather than having to adapt to it. The long months of renovating this much neglected historic building took up much of his creative energy; but meanwhile it has become apparent that this act of forming his own environment was fundamentally creative in itself. Even the most insensitive visitor gradually comes to realize that Brixy's environment could only grow and develop around this particular person. This large industrial building with its dried out underground basin – still forming an extremely bizarre underworld – does no longer rise on a bleak building site which has finally been cleared, but gradually cuddles up to a surge of green. The garden does not assert itself in opposition to the building, but house and garden have found each other in a mutually creative dialogue.

The whole ensemble has a magic which derives from the effortless integration of all its parts. Here everything belongs together. On one side roses, dahlias, peonies, catalpas, vines and olive trees, fuchsias, various sorts of rhododendron and camellias which in spring break into a wealth of flowers, high bamboo plants and in the sunniest corner succulent cactuses. On the other side the building, the people, the animals living with them (three lively dogs and a cat who obviously enjoy this paradise). The plants surround everything, increasingly being a shield against the street outside as well as the neighbouring properties, and they create a living space for the architecture as well as the creatures with two and four legs changing all the time in their growth, flowering and hibernating.

Last, but not least, this is also a living space for the paintings. During the first year after Brixy had moved into the renovated Pumpwerk and could again concentrate on his creative work (he has probably never painted as much in such a short time as here where inspiration literally grows on him), during this first year he concentrated on vines. In the second year bamboos and various flowers prevailed as topics, among others peonies, the Chinese Emperors' flowers. Blossoms of such luxuriant opulence, however short-lived, could not be easily ignored by such a passionate lover as Brixy, and so he finally put the flower paintings together arranging them in a variable installation of thirty parts and an entire length of six meters entitled "Flowerpatch" (later also shown in Iserlohn and other places). And now, in his third year, something strange, yet symptomatic has happened: Brixy has replaced the traditional square format by circular ones. He got the idea – how could it have been otherwise – by noticing that the bamboos in winter bend their blades to the ground in an almost perfect arc, and thus the tondi pay a new tribute to this amazing plant and its many variants.

But the tondo bears a risk if the motif itself is also round: the tension between bent lines and the square framework is missing which has been so characteristic of European tabular painting since its beginnings. However, for Brixy it has a special meaning, because he literally answers "his" plants, because he wants to follow their traces and understand their unbelievable energies of form. Are plants not the true inventors of forms? Do they not push something in each cell which for the artist is a painstaking endeavour? If somebody wants to fathom this phenomenon, he must live up to the dumb partners so full of the energy of life. The paintings must not only have an identity of their own and their outward form, of course, but they must answer to the challenge produced by the motif as well.

The tondo prepared itself for a long time in Brixy's paintings, because the bamboo apparently describes very different curved lines and does not only shoot upwards even in its growth phases. Also, most of the blossoms, the peonies in particular, also have round shapes. Yet, the tondo is not used all the time. There is a square painting almost recalling the flair of the Far East: dark bamboos with traces of turquoise and blue counteract with a festive orange colour heightened by white and yellow, and while three stems stretch vertically upwards on the left side of the painting other parts of the plants have bent to form an arc, thus creating a gate which invites the observer to pass through with his eye. Again and again Brixy has fixed on canvas how the elliptic or cut circular lines of the bamboo stems overlap, intertwine and separate again. It seems as if the plants in their vigorous growth perform mysterious

choreographies. The fact that Brixy uses different radii in these paintings is also proof that the use of the circular form is more than a mere risky formal trick – there being tondi of all sizes which he puts together in mixed groups so that without pretending at plain copying an ensemble of different stages of growth and individuals is reproduced on the walls similar to that in nature outside.

Inside the house, particularly in the large hall, this manner of exploring living things through painting is beautifully integrated and harmonizes with the needs of Brixy's daily life. The tondi correspond to the iron chandelier in three tiers, different vases, bowls and two big green glass cylinders pick up the shapes of the plants, and everywhere large and small objects can be discovered which refer to each other – exotic collector's pieces as well as minerals, shells or pieces of concrete stained with colour which serve to stabilize Brixy's enormous canvasses. Even the cosy corners used for a spontaneous doze by the animals moving about freely which invite you to lean back have their parts to play in the natural wealth of life in this house, and things that grow and unfold inside are mirrored at a different level by what happens outside.

It is always rewarding to look at the paintings carefully. Beginning in the eighties, Brixy's style of painting has always been characterized by the use of subtle semi-transparent layers of colour. From the very beginning this technique has given his paintings a specific lightness hinting at secrets hidden behind veils. In the meantime he uses strong compact colours in brilliant hues, and deeper layers are allowed to break through to the contrasting surface sometimes almost violently without giving the impression that the specific Brixy style of delicate and ephemeral flow and breathing has disappeared. Also, in his most recent paintings, the eye is captured at first by the plasticity of forms, of red blades on green, of yellow-green blades on blue, of bold yellow-red blades against a precious brocaded background also of yellow-red colour, of turquoise on dark, almost black purple, blue-green on flaming orange-red – there is hardly any combination that Brixy would not risk trying. Looking more closely one perceives the vibrating surface of many layers uncovered in different depths, the colours at a lower level often being uncovered in dynamic gestures so that the very colour mix forms the background on which the plants are drawn.

If we speak of blades of bamboo in this text, we do not want to imply that the flexible stems consist of thin lines in the paintings, but they are shaped by vigorous colour bands of four or five colours one next to the other which are bundled together crosswise by the growth knots as if bracketing them horizontally. The inner colour bands are always painted in one energetic line, sometimes in stripes accentuated by in pasto ridges, whereas the outer bands consist of crumbly fragmented colour particles attached to them. In order to interrupt the determined movement of the broad stems using other contrasting means to highlight it, Brixy here and there puts fine colour bands, several spirals overlapping, feathery wisps which recall the dried up protective husks under which the bamboo hid its young shoots. These parts create a colour link with the background and form a special filigree rhythm, its lightness being related to the transparency also found in the paintings of peonies.

Bat wings? Birds' wings? Flower petals? On some of these paintings the blossoms of the peonies despite their delicacy give the impression of powerful explosions with ragged rims or the wings of exotic butterflies. But Brixy also devotes his explorations in paint to gristly crooked branches, solidifications of growth. These pictures betray the gestures of plants which remain present in their bodies. Try to imagine it: the bent lines of the bamboo stems reaching towards the infinite can only be controlled by choosing a part only – the plant as a model of the whole cosmos. The tentative horizontal and vertical lines of the wooden branches reproduced in Brixy's style of painting and explored with his hands and arms, loops which have fascinated him so much that he reduced some of the pictures to these lines only. This takes him and us back to his beginnings, because similar relationships of lines have occupied him for two decades. A painter, growing in concentric circles. Painting as the constant movement of life unfolding.

(Translated by Dr. Elke Platz-Waury)