

Nicole Schmoelzer: Painting, Process, Permutations

As part of her painting strategy, Nicole Schmoelzer likes to play games, to incorporate chance. Each series—Schmoelzer almost always works in series—begins with a rough plan and a certain set of rules but as the work progresses, directed by its specific evolution, the artist permits herself to change those rules, to keep things open-ended. A formalist, but not an adamant one, Schmoelzer uses both linen and paper as supports, considering each to be a separate medium since each conveys paint, colors and composition so differently. She is also transfixed by the interactions that materials have with each other, interactions that are not always predictable, subject as they are to an infinite number of variables. Beginning with a limited number of elements in each project—another characteristic painting strategy—Schmoelzer's recent paintings and works on paper have become more unitary in image, especially the works on paper, concentrating on bands and the opening up those bands, staining and the color yellow which she pushes from a near orange to a shade verging on green. Yellow interests her partly because it is extremely difficult to replicate, its presence an act of resistance to the age of mechanical (and digital) reproduction. With yellow—even more than with other colors—you must see the actual painting. It is also an evocative color with a wide range of associations, foremost of which, perhaps, is light: like sun breaking through, implying heat, energy, life. Yellow, in Schmoelzer's paintings, is a slippery, changeling-like, luminous hue, capable of surprises and subtleties and its participation in the general color schema can be both smooth, an accommodation or dissonant, a refusal to be easily subordinated.

Her composition often refers to a grid, or, in this series, bands intercut with horizontal or vertical brushstrokes to suggest a partial grid, placing them so that a visual opposition is created, a syncopated rhythm and staggered sense of movement across the surface. She works sequentially, probing, taking one element of the painting at a time to see what it does to the construct-in-process, to see how it shifts the development, the gravity and the internal measure of the work. What had been line in other instances is now stretched, widened into a band which in turn became a stained area, and finally a surface. Her format changes but Schmoelzer often prefers a near square measuring 60" x 55" which might be thought of as a square with a bit of lift for buoyancy. On it, she slowly builds up layers of paint then breaks them down again, erases them, abrades them so that the surface is touched over and over again, penetrated, scarified, worn. At the edges, where one color merges with the one next to it, she sometimes places a complementary—or at least a contrasting shade—which produces a sparkle of light when mixed in the eye. An additive and subtractive process, Schmoelzer repeats the layering and removing until she is satisfied with the equilibrium achieved. In essence, all of Schmoelzer's paintings are a continuum, further interpretations and interpolations of the paintings that came before, a commentary on the painting's infinite permutations.

The passages of paint advance and recede, creating a skewed sense of foreground, middle ground and background and the uneven surface snags the viewer's eye on its contradictions and connections, propositions and reversals, textures and smoothness, opacities and luminosities and the nuances of its interwoven tonalities. Curious to see what will happen, Schmoelzer freely experiments and also freely edits. Her paintings, slow to evolve and to reveal themselves, can be taken in as an overall pattern, a summation, but it is the stroke-by-stroke, section-by-section reading that unravels the rich complexity of their orchestration and, ultimately, of their being.

Schmoelzer is a natural, sometimes willful, colorist although her palette is muted, the values close. She will introduce a sudden streak or patch of vivid, idiosyncratic color, an unexpected glimpse of red, green, or blue. Staining #2, for instance, consists of a network of broad golden orange bands threaded by pale green and rosy purple vertical striations which are then zapped by the higher voltage color of a drip or line. Several other paintings conjure up a Caribbean ambience, their flowery color stains and aqueous transparencies suspended like islands in a wavering field seemingly in transition, on the verge of dissolution or solidification.

A contemporary modernist, Schmoelzer continues to be intrigued by materials, process and a serialized, diaristic narrative in which the making of the painting is chronicled. Her perceptual, experiential paintings, with their intimations of the representational, nonetheless remain resolutely abstract, a divided identity that is more the norm than otherwise at the moment. As such, Schmoelzer's elusive, quietly expressive paintings are abstractions for the present.

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