

From the Grey to the Colourful

Interview with Sylke von Gaza



In autumn 2008, Petra Giloy-Hirtz conducted the following interview with the artist after having visited her studio in Munich. Petra Giloy-Hirtz, PhD, is a curator, an author and a partner of curators GmbH, Munich.

Giloy-Hirtz: During my most recent visit to your studio, I saw your *Purple Paintings* and was surprised: by their presence and pathos, by their great emotional power. Previously, I was only familiar with grey in your work.

von Gaza: Yes, I worked in grey for three years. That time was very important for me. Grey is a colour which brings me to the origin of things. It is neither black nor white, but rather a mixture of those two non-colours. So it is something with which one begins. It enabled me to establish the form of my painting without being distracted by colour as such.

Giloy-Hirtz: The thing which connects the two series – the grey and the purple – and thus

gives your work a conceptual quality is the form: the division of the picture plane into two parts by a horizontal line. What does this sort of reduction of painting to a few elements mean to you?

von Gaza: You can do practically anything in painting. First, I had to liberate myself from the cliché in order to penetrate to the essence of painting. I try to leave everything out which has no further meaning for me. Such renunciation is painful. The viewer might get the impression I have a conceptual approach. In fact, I am an emotional painter.

Giloy-Hirtz: What do you say to the associations your paintings evoke in the viewer with

regard to subject matter: horizon or fissure, veil, drapery? Do your works have a narrative level?

von Gaza: No, I work non-representationally, abstractly. Nevertheless, without any direct intention on my part, a deeper meaning is communicated to the viewer. It derives above all from the way I work. Working with just a few things, I try to depict everything which is important to me. In the process, a path is formulated involuntarily and becomes visible. The process of creation is important to me, not just the finished painting.



Sylke von Gaza

Giloy-Hirtz: What does the horizon mean to you?

von Gaza: Yes, the horizon, the line which separates the two planes. It's pretty much the only thing I have left. I try to put everything into this line. I begin the painting process there. It leads me through the painting. I begin with concentration and then let it go immediately when the brush filled with paint glides over the canvas.

The horizon is always sensed. I concentrate and find the middle. Once I sketched the horizon as an experiment. That painting had no charm for me. But it was an interesting experiment.



Petra Giloy-Hirtz

Giloy-Hirtz: How do you achieve this diaphanous, transparent quality in your painting? It is clear that monochrome layers of paint are hidden beneath the lines of the brush. Your brushwork in general...

von Gaza: I work with layers of paint. Usually, I start with a Venetian ground. A kind of homage to fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Italian painting. Often, I then place a brilliantly colourful intermediate layer over that and then paint over it again, with brown, for example. Like everything which is suppressed – in the psychological sense as well – its energy can nonetheless be felt.

The intermediate layers of colour are often complementary to the final layer. For example, a brilliant green as a second layer, covered with a brown layer, will interact energetically with the red of the final layer, with the surface.

Giloy-Hirtz: There are so many differences to discover in the apparent uniformity! But what do you think of while doing it? Of landscape?

von Gaza: I have a great love of nature. The grey sky meeting a grey body of water – then I cannot look away. But that's more because I want to paint an emotion and not the landscape itself. The feeling of oneness I have when I'm in it.

Giloy-Hirtz: So your paintings expression your own personal state?

von Gaza: I try to express something larger which has meaning for everyone. And yet it is my energy. Let me tell a little story.

I had tenosynovitis during the preparation for an exhibition, so I asked my assistant to apply the ground for the painting. When he got to the coloured intermediate layer, I noticed it was not the expression I had imagined. It became clear to me that I could not even define why, but the plane feels different to me. I painted over the paintings in question – they simply did not work.

Over time, I realised that a certain expression can only be produced by the painter's energy. It is unique. The phenomenon already starts when mixing the paint; it goes beyond the painting of individual layers of colour to the surface, which traditionally, too, was, of course, usually painted by the master himself.

Giloy-Hirtz: The surfaces are produced in great concentration, in a meditative process of painting.

von Gaza: Yes, really it's the idea of concentration, repetition and release. Once you have done the same thing over again often enough, a familiarity with your own paintings and with the things themselves results.

Applying the paint to the canvas, directly, with detached concentration, has always been a thrill for me. It's what I like to do most. Delicate,

subtle differences which result in the process of painting fascinate me. The process of painting excites me. So the motif is never boring for me. I express through the brushstroke; I try to put everything I can into it.

Giloy-Hirtz: Which of the old masters of the history of Western art have inspired you?

von Gaza: I am most fascinated by the power of Cimabue's works. I have been touched by the light in Bellini's painting.



Sylke von Gaza

Giloy-Hirtz: To whom do you feel an intellectual kinship when you think of abstract painting?

von Gaza: My encounters with particular works by abstract painters who defined a time are important to me. Again and again, I think about my encounter with works by Rothko in a room in Tate Modern in London.

Giloy-Hirtz: Do you always paint one work at a time?

von Gaza: No, often I conceive my paintings in pairs or in groups. Often I imagine a space in which the finished paintings will hang, as if engaged in dialogue.

For example, when I painted the *Red Veil Master Paintings*, I imagined a space in which six large red veils were hanging. They were supposed to communicate – in terms of their surfaces in relation to one another and in terms of the structure of their colour, the various layers of colour – and yet at the same time convey an impression of unity. There is a synergetic effect. Then they are no longer just six paintings but rather an impression of what I wanted to express.



Sylke von Gaza

Giloy-Hirtz: It is striking that you finish the rather aloof surfaces of the grey series, with their haptic effect of the canvas, with a varnish which reflects the light and almost mirrors the space and the viewer.

von Gaza: At first, it was a reduction to the colour grey which made the form or style even more visible. If you leave something out – in this case,

colour – other things become visible. In my later works in colour, I am interested more in the energetic aspect, how various layers of colour interact.

Giloy-Hirtz: How did you arrive at this idea of treating colour in this way?

Von Gaza: It was more a feeling than a thought. Several years ago, I travelled to Assisi, to the Basilica di San Francesco. There, I encountered the painting of Cimabue for the first time. His energy penetrates the subject. It is about so much more than reproduction. His painting overcomes reproduction and becomes pure expression: energy. I try to do that with colour.

Giloy-Hirtz: You work in series. How did that come about?

von Gaza: Always seeming to do the same thing and yet a different expression results. It is the subtle differences. When produced in series, the paintings come into contact with one another. Usually I paint two or more at a time. In series, it becomes possible to perceive the differences in brushstroke or in the different layers of paint.

Another dimension results that has an effect even between paintings of different colours – for example, between the grey and the red works. They form a context which supplements the individual works. It is also nice to see the brushwork in the rather aloof-looking grey paintings versus the deep colour of the red paintings. Also, I have a hard time separating myself. Having similar paintings consoles me after selling a work. I'm only half joking.

Giloy-Hirtz: The square is your format now, exclusively.

von Gaza: Yes, the square is an ideal form. When I paint a square format, I first have to destroy something, namely an ideal dimension. That happens with the first brushstroke.

With a rectangle, it is different. Then there is a tendency to produce an ideal proportion, with the aid of the golden section, for example. When I paint a square, I destroy the harmony in order

to recreate it in the process of painting. That is a different approach. I used to work with rectangular formats as well. I find the square more appealing in this context.

Giloy-Hirtz: You studied with Sean Scully. Why did you choose him as a teacher?

von Gaza: I first encountered Scully's work at a show at the Haus der Kunst in Munich. The first painting I saw was *Durango*. I felt like I'd been hit with a right hook. At the same time, I can recall thinking that anyone that intense is also sensitive. Somehow I recognised part of myself in those works.

Giloy-Hirtz: What interested you about the way Scully teaches?

von Gaza: I wanted a teacher whose intensity I could rely on. I need resistance. Scully gave something more like psychological lessons than formal instructions. It was about overcoming one's own psychological limitations.

According to the maxim: Know yourself, then you will know what kind of painter you are. He was not always exactly gentle about that.

Translation: Steven Lindberg / Photos: Vera Nowotny



Sylke von Gaza



Sylke von Gaza, Petra Giloy-Hirtz