

Post-war modernism in the Barberini Museum

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Painting in the here and now

With the exhibition "The Form of Freedom" the Potsdam Museum Barberini shows how abstract painting began its triumphal march after 1945. VON [BERNHARD SCHULZ](#)



Sam Francis' painting My Shell Angel. PHOTO: LUTZ BERTRAM© SAM FRANCIS FOUNDATION, CALIFORNIA/AVG BILD-KUNST, BONN 2022

The prelude is a painting in light tones by Janice Biala. Born in 1903 in Poland, which was then part of Russia, she emigrated to the USA with her family in 1913. In 1952 she painted the picture that is now displayed so prominently in the Museum Barberini in Potsdam.

Her name is not among those mentioned in connection with post-war American art. Just as little as that of Hedda Sterne, whose dark-colored painting "NY #7" was created in 1955 and hung nearby. Only the small-format works by Jackson Pollock on the left ("The Teacup", 1946) and Arshile Gorky on the right ("Pastorale", 1945), who died early, provide support for the memory.

Rediscovered Artists

The start is program. With the exhibition entitled "The Form of Freedom", curator Daniel Zamani wants to present "International Abstraction after 1945", from Europe and North America, and wants to tread well-trodden paths and leave them at the same time. Committing by presenting works by all the artists famous as abstract artists, such as [Mark Rothko](#), [Willem de Kooning](#) or Barnett Newman, but leaving at the same time by adding those overlooked to the list of 52 participating artists. Most of them are female artists, of whom only a few, like Lee Krasner or Helen Frankenthaler, have achieved the same visibility in the art world.

And the opening with Janice Biala makes a second thing clear: the close connection that exists between old Europe and the young continent on the other side of the Atlantic in the development of abstraction. Europe, in this case France, responded to the horrors of the dictators and, not to forget, their collaborators with existentialism as a philosophy of radical, if tragic, freedom. In the transatlantic exchange, the USA relied on artists who had already fought for their freedom, in many cases, especially among immigrants of Jewish origin, through liberation from oppression and persecution. For them, for the emigrants and hence immigrants, the promise of freedom had come true. Also for those who did not have to flee persecution, like Willem de Kooning, who entered the country illegally in 1926,

In 1948 the first [Venice Biennale](#) took place after the war, with only 15 participating nations - but the collector Peggy Guggenheim, who used one of the empty pavilions and showed works by Pollock, whom she unwaveringly promoted, as well as works by those who were also still unknown in Europe Rothko, Clyfford Still, and Robert Motherwell.

The European scene took notice: there was something new, something radical; and although Peggy Guggenheim, who later transferred her New York-built collection to Venice, had never hidden the roots of US abstraction in European surrealism, the Americans were perceived as wholly distinct.

Pollock became the central figure. Tragically surrounded by his psychological problems and constant excesses, he presented the excitement and risk of freedom in a prototypical way. His "Drip Paintings" had thrown off the eggshells of Surrealism and had become pure "Action Painting", in which the execution of the act of painting and its result on the canvas became one. Pollock lived "in" his paintings. And they have been exhibited around the world, with strong participation from the Museum of Modern Art and the US Information Service.

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Die Ausstellung des Barberini betreibt gottlob keine Heldenverehrung. Stattdessen kommt Pollocks Partnerin Lee Krasner gleichberechtigt zu Wort, und sie ist, wie man im direkten Bildvergleich gewahr wird, von gleicher Statur. Neben dem „Action Painting“ räumt die Ausstellung der Farbfeldmalerei gebührenden Raum ein, so dass die kontemplativen Bilder eines Rothko oder Newman sich entfalten; besonders schön Newmans Bildpaar „Adam – Eva“ von 1950-52, bei dem die konträre Aufteilung in Braun und Rot eine ungeheure Spannung erzeugt.

Ähnlich die feinen Farbnuancen bei Helen Frankenthalers „Blauen Blasebälgen“ von 1976. Die Jahreszahl deutet an, dass Kurator Zamani nicht bei der Nachkriegszeit stehen bleibt, sondern den Bogen bis an den Ausgang des 20. Jahrhunderts schlägt. Dazwischen liegen die späten 1950er und frühen 60er Jahre, als die US-Abstraktion tatsächlich führend war, bekräftigt durch Auftritte bei der „documenta“ 2 von 1959 und 3 von 1964. Morris Louis kam hinzu und vor allem der gefeierte Sam Francis, von dem Barberini-Stifter Hasso Plattner das leuchtende, wandfüllende Spätwerk „Mein Muschel-Engel“ von 1986 besitzt, das mit ein Anlass für diese Ausstellung war.

Frankreich antwortet mit "Art informel"

Und Europa? Will Grohmann, der schon in der Weimarer Zeit bedeutende Kunstkritiker, rang sich 1958 das Urteil ab, man könne „angesichts der Vielzahl von hohen Begabungen von einer amerikanischen Schule sprechen“ – und „die Festung der französischen Schule erschüttert“ sah. Zuerst Frankreich, dann ganz Europa antwortete mit der „Art informel“, wie das griffige Stichwort lautete. Frappierend bleibt der Unterschied in den Formaten: Die Europäer malten anfangs kleine, intime Bilder, wie der unglückliche Wols, der als deutscher Emigrant in Paris zu spätem Ruhm kam. Drei Bilder von ihm, der vor den Nazis Zuflucht nahm, und drei des seelenverwandten Jean Fautrier, der in der Résistance gekämpft hatte, bilden auf einer einzigen Wandfläche der Ausstellung ein solches Schwergewicht, dass dagegen manches amerikanische Großformat verblasst.

[Potsdam, Museum Barberini, bis 25. September. Katalog bei Prestel, 34 €, im Buchhandel 42 €. www.museum-barberini.de]

Zum Abschluss lässt Kurator Zamani den deutschen Informellen eine verdiente Würdigung zukommen. Karl Otto Götz, Ernst Wilhelm Nay, Fritz Winter, Fred Thieler, Bernard Schultze, sie alle waren vom Krieg gezeichnet und verstanden die „informelle“, abstrakte und gestische Malerei als Befreiung von ihren traumatischen Erlebnissen. Winfred Gaul, als Angehöriger der Flakhelfer-Generation einer der Jüngsten, brachte das moralische Problem auf den Punkt, indem er fragte, „Malen ! (...) Ist das nicht Wahnsinn, nach allem, was geschehen ist?“

Mehr zum Thema



Mark Rothko

Der Augenblick vor der Explosion

Von Nicola Kuhn

The "madness" was prolific on both sides of the Atlantic and remained so for decades. The "abstraction as a world language" that the "documenta" makers proclaimed in 1959 was not the only language of its time, but it was an incredibly powerful and polyphonic one. It was and is a language that left national narrow-mindedness behind like no art movement before it. And in

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