



"Ludlow/Leipzig" at Klaus von Nichtssagend



Ludlow/Leipzig, Benjamin Butler and Bastian Muhr, Klaus von Nichtssagend, Installation view.

By JONATHAN GOODMAN, August 2020

Benjamin Butler, an American painter now based in Vienna, and Bastian Muhr, a German artist with a studio in Leipzig, are friends and have discussed their shared predilection for a mostly abstract idiom--a joint interest that has led to this very good show. Butler makes paintings that are an acid green; they exist in sets of four panels, and are made more complex by the thin black lines that can be seen as slender trees ever so slightly disrupting the verdigris monochrome that compels our gaze. Muhr works differently, making smallish abstract works in a matte black; these images may be characterized by masses with rounded protrusions, which, when joined together, result in a multi-paneled effort (as seen in the exhibition space) that looks like a compendium/dictionary of organic forms. Together, the two artists have set up a dialogue about current possibilities in image-making, with Butler harkening back to American minimalist roots (even though his works must be considered abstracted landscapes), and Muhr working up a non-objective vocabulary, one apparently engaged in pushing ahead the possibilities of abstract rounded-edge form--both in an individual and a composite sense.

Butler's sets of green panels are so bright as to seem, at first glance, slightly hard on the eyes. *Green Fourest* (2020) consists of four panels 100 centimeters tall; their narrow divides result in thin black lines that indicate the gap between one panel and the next but also suggest tree-like stripped verticals. This is landscape reduced to its essentials. Color itself takes a primary place in the work; the green is so brilliantly hued, it stands out in the small space housing the work of the two artists. In *Green Fourest*, there are slight variations in shade--passages of slightly darker or lighter green--that approximate the modulations of that

color we find in examples of foliage. We can wonder about the relations between abstraction and figuration in this work--in many ways, *Green Fourest* looks like a sophisticated color field work, in which the quality of the color alone takes precedent. At the same time the green does reliably reproduce the luminous green we experience in the leaves of trees on a summer day. So the figurative part is actually extremely specific--at least in regard to its hue--as well as being more than a bit abstract.

The untitled panels by Muhr, all of them a single size (24 by 19 inches), are simple abstractions characterized by a central body, off of which small outthrusting forms occur. Vaguely amoebic in shape, they look like giant insects or sea creatures of the deep, even though they remain resolutely abstract in the same moment. Like Butler, Muhr is interested in the interface between what actually exists in the world in a visual sense and also how such an image might also exist as a pure abstraction. In both artists' works, it looks like the paintings tend toward abstraction, perhaps anchored by their realist implications. In the show up now, Muhr is presenting a set of the panels, some seven rows of three panels aligned vertically. The effect is mural-like, with a complexity born of reiterated forms. Although I have ascribed some realism to the paintings, in this wall of imagery, it makes sense to see its overall effect as non-objective in nature, being given to the innate, non-figurative truths of its own forms, rather than embodying a likeness to anything we see. In this case, as with Butler, the argument for an abstract reading comes close to taking the upper hand, primarily because it is hard with both artists to pin down the figurative aspects of the imagery.

Even so, it is not easy to see these artists as completely taking the side of either abstraction or figuration. This is not so unusual in contemporary fine art, which often plays with the interaction between the two ways of looking at the world. One way of keeping art interesting and new is to find the interstice between the two ways kinds of seeing, and to make that the center of the artist's creativity. It is only with extended looking that we find out how the languages merge, even if just for the moment. Butler and Muhr are particularly good in their approach to a complex formalism, picking up from earlier attempts to merge nonobjective art with a realist insight. The complexity exists despite the relative simplicity of the forms we encounter. It is also true that this is painting about painting, in which the delivery of the medium, brightly colored or not, onto the surface is as important as the imagery we see. (But here too the paint application is subtle enough to evade easy recognition.) So much art today results from considerations about the process of art-making--it is art about itself. Clearly, Butler is painting a distant version of the landscape; and just as clearly the work by Muhr relates to forms we can imagine as enlargements of insect creatures in the world. The abstract elements, inevitable in both groups of work, indicate a certain intellectualism on the artists' part. Thus, the conceptual aspect of their work strengthens its currency as a language that is devoted to the present, just as the figurative aspect ties the art to the past. **WM**