

*„Abstract photography is an artistic position, which operates with a fundamental contradiction: It operates per se between photography as classical documentation and photography as a wish machine, which can generate images whose origins and references are neither recognizable nor traceable.“<sup>1</sup>*

In his photographic work of the past few years, Tobias Grewe has investigated the aesthetic possibilities of color photography by abstracting details of physical reality. His motifs are oriented on a range of themes revolving around urban architecture. And through the use of unusual perspectives, details and exposures he has developed his own unique view of the colours, forms and structures of façades, columns and other elements of modern architecture by liberating these from their original settings and transferring them as photographs into new possibilities of visual perception. Some of these consciously selected details reveal the inherent sculptural qualities of the abstracted motifs, either through the natural lighting conditions at the time of shooting or photo-technically through the use of apertures and shutter speeds. Other works appear almost dematerialized as a result of overexposure, resulting in a graphic interpretation of the respective building structure.

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Beginning with a detailed observation of various urban spaces, architectural motifs become the multilayered starting point of a photographic oeuvre for which Tobias Grewe uses, among other photo-technical instruments, the spontaneous possibilities of contemporary digital camera technology, including, a smartphone camera for his series of *iPhone Sketches* or an optically highly developed Canon full-frame CMOS digital single-lens reflex camera. Concentrated on the particularities of modern architecture, “it

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is less the buildings as such and much more the carefully chosen details of façades as well as the play of light and the often extreme perspective"<sup>2</sup>, which are characteristic for Grewe's motifs, which are not subjected to post-production digital manipulation.

Whereas, in the course of his analysis of photography as an artistic medium, he first created works, within which narrative moments in an urban context were still recognizable, in his more recent works, Tobias Grewe frees himself to a great extent from such narrative references. Thus, the mostly large-format photoworks from his *Colourfields* and *Refractions* series present compositions, which concentrate on the visual possibilities of photography within the field of abstract color field compositions, so that the title chosen by Tobias Grewe for the exhibition of works from these current series, *Who's Afraid of Photography?* can be seen as a particularly meaningful reference to the non-objective color field painting of Barnett Newman. When, between the years 1966 and 1970, Barnett Newman created his four large-scale icons of Color Field Painting with the common title *Who's Afraid of Red, Yellow and Blue*<sup>3</sup>, two grueling decades of artistic and theoretical analysis of the philosophy of painting in the modern era in the wake of the Second World War - which was also subject to critical public debate - lay behind him. In the late 1940s, Newman had already developed his own typical style of Color Field Painting, in which monochrome fields of color were crossed or delimited by vertical lines, the so-called "zips", as compositional elements that divided the pictorial space into distinct sections. This process can also be found in the aforementioned four-part series of paintings, whereby the proportions of the color fields and the "zips", that separate or delimit these, vary from picture to picture. The viewer "should not be afraid" of the intensive, monochrome primary colors but rather concentrate on color itself and its potential.

Like various other kindred spirits of Abstract Expressionism, to which Color Field Painting belongs as an artistic movement, Newman strove in his work for a consideration of the intrinsic values of painting as an absolute, autonomous and sublime position, without being bound to any subject matter beyond color itself. Even the stroke of the paintbrush was eliminated to avoid leaving a possible trace of gestural narration; instead, the paint was applied in multiple, flat layers in order to intensify its own individual effect. The concentration on this moment of color intrinsic to painting was intended to lead the viewer to an intensive, spiritual-emotional perception of color.<sup>4</sup> This was, of course, complemented by the spatial presence of the predominantly large-scale formats of the paintings.

With a paraphrase of the title of the painting series by Barnett Newman (which in turn makes reference to the title of a play by Edward Albee, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, itself an adaptation of the children's song *Who's Afraid of the Big Bad Wolf?*), Tobias Grewe now invites the viewer, four decades later, to consider the possibilities of abstract color field aesthetics in the form of large-scale photographs and, in doing so, reveals the media-specific neutrality of the photographic picture surface in connection with its own color effects, which are in turn determined by light.

Just as Newman's Color Field Painting was divided by the "zips" into various fields of color, the recent photographic images by Tobias Grewe from the *Colourfields* series are structural compositions of monochrome fields of color, which at first glance appear to be divided by abstract vertical stripes, before, at closer inspection and corresponding with his photographic *modus operandi*, these abstractions reveal themselves to be architectural elements, such as columns and protruding façade elements or blinds and glass fronts of office buildings. At first glance, the color schemes of the *Colourfields* appear to be mere

abstract compositions of color. At second glance, however, one can also recognize, in addition to their abstract pictorial qualities, modulations, three-dimensional elements and graphic traces as references to a documentary survey, which always precedes Tobias Grewe's invention of images.

In the work *Colourfields #5 - Cologne* (2012), a yellow and a magenta colored column stand up in front of a blue wall. Since this motif can be seen as an adaptation of the pure primary colors red, yellow and blue, it clearly makes the most direct reference to the works of Barnett Newman. Unlike Newman's non-objective painting, however, the concrete structure and its shadows that modulate the columns and the various traces of dirt and scratches still visible on the magenta-colored column, make it clear that the source of the vertical structures in Tobias Grewe's photographs are not abstract "zips" but rather architectural elements.

In the juxtaposition of color fields in white and gradual shades of orange superimposed by dot structures and divided through the play of sharpness and blurring, *Colourfields #6 - #8 - Cologne* (2011) are not -

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should one want to track down the documentary evidence - based on a construed, abstract composition, but rather on the vertical solar shading louvers of an office building in Cologne.

Other works from the series, such as *Colourfields #13 - Los Angeles* (2012) or *Cubed - Seoul* (2012), reveal structures of irregular geometric patterns of color. They seem to depict painterly enlarged pixels and were discovered by Tobias Grewe in the urban spaces of the respective American and Korean metropolises, where they function as decorative architectural elements influenced by Color Field Painting in the public space, which Grewe then transformed into unique and independent photographic images.

With *Shades of Yellow and Green - Cologne* (2011) and *Shades of Red and Gray - Cologne* (2011), the dynamic structure of rectangular color formations reveals the colors mentioned in the respective

titles, whereby this visual play of color proportionalities was also preceded by the artist's perception of a structurally and color-schemed glazing, transected by the gray, slightly arched stripe of a supporting structure on the building's façade.

In addition to this fragmentary view of architectural elements, the starting point of other works can also be found in details of a sculpture in the public space, as in *Colourfields #9 - #11 - Paris* (2011). In their translation into two-dimensional photoworks, the colorful tubes of the sculpture appear as rainbow-like progressions of monochrome stripes and are presented by Tobias Grewe as variations in three distinct pictures. Only at second glance do the shadows and the subtly haptic qualities of the individual tubes reveal themselves, so that the light, which emphasizes the colors and the sculptural qualities of the images, once again becomes a significant compositional medium within the photoworks of Tobias Grewe.

As a result of the artist's interest not only in the intrinsic value of color, but also in the interaction of the sculptural qualities of architectural elements and their possible perception within a two-dimensional photographic image, he created for a site-specific installation in 2012 the photo-sculpture *Colourfields - Die Stille Post* (Chinese Whispers). The work and its title are a play on the children's game, whereby a message is passed on in a whisper within a group from one player to the next and is gradually mutated in the process. With this large-scale, site-specific installation, Tobias Grewe translates the two-dimensional photographic image of a group of stout, colored columns back into one three-dimensional, photographic-sculptural column. He thus plays through the possibilities of the arrangement and perception of color within various compositional and formal modes and on various levels of perception, both on the surface and in the third dimension in the form of a sculpture. As with the other works from the *Colourfields*

series, he concentrates here, in this sculptural photowork, on the perception of color compositions and their possible spatial effects.

Whereas the works in the *Colourfields* series refer to aspects of Color Field Painting, the works from the *Refractions* series make reference to Op Art as an additional movement in the field of abstract painting. Since the 1960s, artists have combined here moments of Color Field Painting with aspects of Constructivism to create optical illusionary spaces by means of a conscious conception of geometric structures and rhythms of color. Within the photoworks from the *Refractions* series, it is once again stripes of color, which appear to fall out of balance or founder, and thus determine the respective composition in an optically irritating manner. As with the *Colourfields*, these photographs are also based on existing architectural details in order to instigate a medially translated, expanded visual experience.

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In their broad range of compositional and perceptual possibilities, the recent works of Tobias Grewe demonstrate that the spectrum of his visual analysis of the medium of photography and the possibilities of an abstracting view of the particularities of pictorial motifs, both in terms of coloration and structure, whose original points of reference are derived from the field of urban architecture, is far from being exhausted.

Detached from their respective urban architectural context, which could intimate their location within a particular surrounding and, along with this, various documentary or narrative inferences, Tobias Grewe creates abstract images with his current photoworks, which, as opposed to that which the French philosopher and author Roland Barthes described in his famous essay *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, seem to have their references only minimally “on board”.<sup>5</sup> Inspired by aspects of Color

Field Painting and Op Art, his most recent series concentrate on the depiction of the pictorially abstract and auratic qualities of colors, structures and his own research into the photographic space of a picture. With regard to the aspect of abstraction as a compositional strategy, references to other positions within the field of contemporary photography can also be made.<sup>6</sup> As with Tobias Grewe, these artists are also interested in that unique quality of photography to create a picture as a document of reality and simultaneously, as described by Magdalena Kröner in the quote cited above, using it as a “wish machine, which can generate images whose origins and references are neither recognizable nor traceable.”<sup>7</sup> The recent works of Tobias Grewe can thus be used as a prime example to investigate the essence and pictorial possibilities of photography and to open oneself up to the perception of his art works “without being afraid of the medium” and its abstract qualities.

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**1** Magdalena Kröner, „Form, Fragment, Formation. Aktuelle Tendenzen der abstrakten Fotografie“, in: *Kunstforum International*, Vol. 206: *Neue Abstraktion*, edited by Sven Drühl, 2011, p. 107. **2** Gérard A. Goodrow, „Tobias Grewe“, in: Olaf Salié (Ed.), *RISING! Young Artists to Keep an Eye On*, Daab Media, Cologne, 2011, p. 140. **3** The four versions of the painting belong today to the following museums/collections: *Who's Afraid of Red, Yellow and Blue I*, 1966, oil on canvas, Collection David Geffen, Los Angeles; *Who's Afraid of Red, Yellow and Blue II*, 1967, Staatsgalerie Stuttgart; *Who's Afraid of Red, Yellow and Blue III*, 1966/67, Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam; *Who's Afraid of Red, Yellow and Blue IV*, 1969/70, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin – Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Nationalgalerie und Verein der Freunde der Nationalgalerie. **4** Barnett Newman, „Selected Writings“, in: Armin Zweite (Ed.), *Barnett Newman. Bilder, Skulpturen, Graphik*, ex. cat., Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, Düsseldorf / Hatje Cantz, Ostfildern-Ruit, 1997, p. 150. In the history of their critical reception, the paintings *Who's Afraid of Red, Yellow and Blue III* and *IV* elicited extreme reactions in the form of various acts of art vandalism, which can only be explained as being the outcome of the personality disorders of the respective assailants. **5** Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (translated by Richard Howard), Hill and Wang, New York, 1980. **6** Magdalena Kröner, op cit. In the article, the author addresses the photo-historical development of abstract photography and presents the recent works of artists such as Stefan Heyne, Wolfgang Tillmans, Sebastian Riemer, Thomas Ruff and various others. **7** Ibid.