

Werner von Mutzenbecher

9.9.—

13.11.2022

It could have proceeded in an almost typical fashion: a retrospective of a multifaceted oeuvre that has been cultivated and driven forward by the artist since the late 1950s. But Werner von Mutzenbecher rightly shies away from such conceptualizations and all-encompassing attempts at retrospection. Moving forward is what matters—little has changed in that regard, even at eighty-five years of age. And even though both our wishes for a large survey exhibition and a comprehensive catalogue are now coming true with his show at Kunsthaus Baselland, the artist ultimately does not seem to find it easy to present more than his most recent works. There is a good reason for this: Werner von Mutzenbecher works relentlessly on his oeuvre, creating drawings, large and small-format paintings, sitting at his own editing suite in the studio, writing texts, editing books, taking photographs, releasing DVDs of his films, giving readings. Even the pandemic seems to have spurred rather than slowed down his artistic activity.

A cornucopia of artistic directions and subjects. A life in pictures. In response to von Mutzenbecher's exhibition at Kunsthalle Basel in the 1980s, Jean-Christophe Ammann rightly wrote about the artist's "receptivity to images," the way that he is able to transform everything he absorbs into pictures—whether drawn, painted, or animated. But how can we present this extensive oeuvre in excerpts? How can we choose representative works, how can we bring those that have never or seldom been seen to the fore while excluding or minimizing others? There is enough content to fill a whole building. However, this was never intended to be an exhaustive exhibition, but rather an exciting journey through his work, accompanied by a monographic catalogue that emphatically illustrates the abundance and rich variety of his oeuvre in texts and images.

The fact that not all the images you encounter in life will be positive, but that you will have to come to terms with them nonetheless, is perhaps especially applicable to Werner von Mutzenbecher. He moved from Silesia to Riehen in Switzerland at an early age, carrying with him the images, experiences, and the family aftermath of the Second World War. And during the decades that followed, in which his own family history began to unfold, this postwar

history continued to resonate. The numerous large-format paintings from those years, which Werner von Mutzenbecher gave titles such as *KZ-Bilder* (Concentration Camp Pictures), *Schlachtenbilder* (Battle Scenes), or *Totenzimmer* (Death Rooms), have a mournful and often somber quality about them. A melancholy view of a world lying in ruins. He is not a pessimist, but rather an observant realist who counters the violence of those years with an artistic language in order to be able to name what is often unspeakable.

Something else he named was his Action Paintings, which he began creating in the 1960s by adding layer upon layer of paint to canvases until they could hardly be moved. They seem like a liberation from the years before. Wild, gestural, dark-toned—and yet there are already cubic forms present here that appear to work their way to the surface from the depths of his typically expansive application of paint. The step that follows therefore seems logical: his paintings become lighter, dispersions on cotton instead of oil on coarse burlap; the forms settle down into geometric images; and color also keeps making an appearance alongside black and white. In addition to this, the image space becomes larger and opens up via these geometric shapes, which—similar to building components or boxes—give each form its depth. At the same time, von Mutzenbecher was producing large gouaches on paper, which also heightened the new lightness of his work. In those years, especially the 1970s, von Mutzenbecher not only made significant advances in painting, but also in his work with Super 8 and 16 mm film.

These films reflect his own movement, especially his trips or stays at places such as Rome in 1970/1971. On his grand tour of America a few years later, which took him to New York and Chicago, he carried a handily sized Minox camera with him, which allowed him to react quickly as well as to see and remember in a precise, visual manner. Bridges, railroad lines, skyscrapers—graphic and geometric elements in an urban context—fascinated him. For one thing, they are an echo of what excites him about painting, but they also seem to anticipate what appears to solidify in his paintings and drawings of the 1980s and 1990s: checkered patterns, net and line pictures as well as large gouaches on paper, on which words and sentence fragments appear like flashlights, are created in the sequence. Color also reappears, primarily red and blue alongside black and white. By that time, film and video have become daily companions and reflect von Mutzenbecher's visual approach. Grounded in the experimental film of this period, they are personal glimpses of the world that can be grasped on both a small and a collective scale.

It is not surprising that after a few years of this painterly experimentation, Werner von Mutzenbecher returned once again to strict abstraction and gave priority to geometry and signs, mostly in black, white, and red. His painterly cosmos is the world around him, his work the abstraction and interpretation of it; its implementation can be at once figurative, abstract or concrete. Perhaps this is the key to Werner von Mutzenbecher's complexity, to the wealth of media that the artist is able to capitalize upon. The subjects demand the choice of genres, not the other way around. Whether Super 8 or 16 mm films, video, graphic works, photography, large or small-format paintings, prose or volumes of poetry, Werner von Mutzenbecher chooses—to this day—the correct form for what needs to be grasped, understood, captured, remembered, commented on and, above all, translated into an artistic language. Sometimes his own images and narratives are supplemented with those from esteemed colleagues of various generations or even his role models in order to enrich his own canon with both private and collective elements.

During the last visit to his studio, Werner von Mutzenbecher once again showed me some paintings he had just created: a large-format series of vertical paintings that feature crystalline structures and shapes in black, but also blue. A shimmering structure that is able to expand from the canvas over the adjacent wall. Movement in the image and in sequence. Once again, this is a work that carries within itself the many that precede it; it depicts not only painting, but all the genres that Werner von Mutzenbecher is able to advance in such an astonishing and simultaneously masterful way—where else would tomorrow be found?
(Ines Goldbach)

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Opening hours
Tuesday to Sunday
11 am – 5 pm

Approx. 15 minutes from
Basel SBB main station or
Basel Bad. Bahnhof

Thursday, 6 October, 6.30 pm Artist Talk with Werner von Mutzenbecher

With Book Launch

Werner von Mutzenbecher, born 1937 in Frankfurt a.M., moved to Riehen, school and studies in Basel. Lives and works in Basel. Stays abroad in Paris and Rome, various trips in Europe (including Poland) and overseas (USA, Mexico, Indonesia). 1977 Curator ad interim at the Kunsthalle Basel. 1973-87 teaching at the Basel School of Design, from 1987-2000 head of the specialist class for free visual design (painting class). From 1967/68: texts, 16 mm and Super 8 films, later also videos. Exhibition activities and film screenings at home and abroad. Various prizes and awards, including the cultural prize of the municipality of Riehen. For detailed information, including all individual and group exhibitions, see the monograph, which will be available at the beginning of October.

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