

Andreas Johnen

We are used to being able to distinguish between what a painting *is* and what a painting is *of*, but here that distinction is blurred. You could point to each one and say: This is a painting of time. This is a painting of labour. This is a painting of 150 layers of red, yellow, or green.

In his practice Andreas Johnen (b. 1974, Aachen) uses different methods to saturate paper with colour. He simply applies the paint until the paper can hold no more. In this sense, the title of his most recent exhibition with Jochen Hempel in Leipzig is very much true: *What you see is what you get!*

In making the large multi-piece watercolours, Johnen fastened the paper horizontally to wooden plates with masking tape, and poured paint onto its surface two litres at a time, repeating the procedure up to 120 times. Here the paper comes alive, bulging and convulsing under the colour, as they merge.

For the small square monochromes in the series *24 Colours*, an equally astonishing number of layers were applied more meticulously with a brush while the paper was mounted to the wall. With this technique, each colour transforms into a solid material of its own, consuming the paper as if a colour were a noun, not an adjective.

In a more recent series, papers are dipped in colour continuously over the course of several months. These black squares hang like handkerchiefs on the wall as though recovering from the shock of two elements, paint and paper, becoming one with time.

Although seemingly similar, these monochromes each have a life of their own – and one not just determined by the method that brought them into being, but by the material characteristics of each colour pigment, given time and space to breathe.

Since its art historical beginnings, the monochrome has been seen to fulfil two functions: a formal one, in which the painting is reduced to its pure physical elements, and a spiritual one, attempting to give shape to the immaterial. Any good monochrome could always be said to be both.

With his emphasis on repetition and process, Andreas Johnen follows in the tradition of conceptual minimalists such as Carl Andre and Charlotte Posenenske for whom the art object was nothing more (or less) than the labour through which it was produced. A brick is a brick is a brick, said Andre, who famously never took off his worker's uniform. In the same way, in Johnen's paintings, the divine touch of the artist disappears in a serialised process where colour is simply colour, applied again and again. This is not a nihilistic gesture, but an ode to effort, materiality and care.

On the other hand, the monochrome – which is not a representation of, say, blue, but the very essence of blueness itself, as in the work of Yves Klein – makes a claim to spirituality in figuring the immaterial. As such, the many layers of paint imbue Johnen's work with a haptic density glowing from within, while the slow and rhythmic ritual of its production lends it a patient tranquility that we know almost only from religion. Much more than mere matter, then, the rare calm of these works offers a moment of comfort and concentration.

In Johnen's paintings, we see pure form invigorated by a transcendental streak; at once incredibly simple and intensely poetic.

Kristian Vistrup Madsen.