

Olaf Quantius
nomad paintings
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The sense of the cottage

The *nomad paintings* by Olaf Quantius

If one crosses the national boundary between Basel and Hégenheim taking the street Rue de Bâle, they will come across a small custom house at the edge of the road. This checkpoint appears abandoned in an odd way – as if the people in this region with national boundaries to three different countries are used to architectural structures of boundaries – but right here, this small house seems removed from its original function, one becomes an „unnoticed“ border crosser. The house is a lonely guardian or witness, pushed to the edge, but still indicating its power to control like a distant memory. This small house appears again in the painting *Custom House* (2006), also part of the new series *nomad paintings*. The singular structure is placed in the centre of the painting and founds itself on insecure ground, where vegetative motifs grow outside opaque oil paint and stand out against the shining blue of the façade. The house is isolated in a moving natural system where amorphous and abstract forms proliferate and are framed by the blurry silhouettes of trees, where the custom house gains sculptural firmness through its figurative reality. There is an interplay between the smeared paint on the top edge of the painting, where the paint drops run down the image and the silver background that can be read both as far from the road and as an endless, weightless space.

In his paintings the artist devotes his attention to objects of everyday life, the unseen, the unnoticed. The paintings are mostly part of series with suggestive titles that circle around the meaning of words and their possible realms of association. The artist transforms these observations to an autonomous syntax of the image that represents new readings of what already exists. With his new series *nomad paintings* Olaf Quantius focuses on the modest and simple architecture of cottages and houses. They are often found isolated from conglomeration and are built for economical use like a warehouse in the garden or a shack for tools and agricultural products. Above all, they are found places where the prospect of lingering is not really inviting.

The cottages in *Hégenheim III* (2006) or in *Quonset* (2006) don't mediate a cosy atmosphere, they're forgotten buildings whose function remains unclear. Their provisional and fragile construction communicates their temporality. Additionally, if people are absent, the geometrical forms of the cottages indicate the human body and become intrinsically related to it. Gaston Bachelard describes the literary image of the occasional house located in a rough nature, i.e. in a winter landscape, as an image where its power of resistance and ability to protect get transformed into human values, which expect the physical and moral energies of a human body (1). The same happens in Olaf Quantius' paintings: The inhospitable cottages receive a physical quality. The cottages are the only protagonists and as intrinsic objects they are fixed points of calmness within the deserted landscapes that shift between vibrating vagueness, painterly exclusions and processes of abstractions.

Photos that the artist took from time to time during his walks close to his studio in Hégenheim were sometimes a model for the *nomad paintings*. In such walks Quantius functions as an artistic nomad—who does not ramble afield or on longer journeys, but traces to something that can be encountered during a short trip. In general the term nomad means people, who don't settle in one place but search continuously for new life resources. However, the provisional cottages in the *nomad paintings*, sometimes built with fantasy, do not indicate physical movement or nomadic use, but rather express territorial settledness. Hence, it is within the medium of painting where the transitory element can be found in

Quantius' images. In *Quonset* (2006) abstraction and figuration meet: Staining fields of paint cover the upper surface of the image and alienate what we thought to have recognized, while at the same time we recognize the artist's markmaking, which indicates the particular situation of art production. The crossroad in *Exit* (2006) does not only show a parting of ways as a subject: The paint shows a life of its own: Through its dripping down the canvas, the edges of the road are dissolved and it breaks through the fictional space. Inside the window of *Custom House* the shadows of the surroundings are reflected, that is excluded inside the actual image – the window becomes a place where the image generates itself to a new one. Within the paintings the landscape is in the process of genesis and at the same time this moment of its forming gets frozen. The intersections between clearly structured figuration to open, abstract elements do not follow a traceable system, so the interferences fling us back to our own ability of seeing. In Quantius images the silver background dissociates our gaze. The silver becomes a projection screen that also hints to the glamour and the desirous, shining fetishes of the popular culture of consumption. The antagonism between the industrial and nature becomes neutralised through these readings of the colour silver, which additionally emphasise the image's artificiality. Moments of fuzziness, caused by rapid painting, make the motifs seem to float on the upper surface and allude to the radiographic technique of photography, to focus and veil objects simultaneously. The fuzziness of trees and plants evokes a movement and gets intensified by the smooth rejecting surface of the silver that transcends the motifs and overwhelms them with a timeless space.

Nomad painting *Untitled (dak, nomad painting 8)*, shows an abstract composition on silver viridescence ground, where drifting cubes, amorphous forms, free floating stains, and dense colour gradients cover the image like cicatrization and run down the canvas. In contrast to the paintings with cottages, a mental space unfolds that simultaneously contains and visualizes the movement and generation of the image. Quantius specifically analyses the semantics of the single components and combines them to new visual structures.

The sculpture *Barn* (2007) manifests the same analytical interest for single elements like the parts of the facade, the surface and construction of a barn. *From the inside* (2007) shows the inside of a storehouse, but as in the other houses no intimacy appears. The penetrable structure is located inside an undefined space, where glittering light seems to break through. Inside and outside diffuse, as the concrete frameworking planks are silhouetted against the empty background, they change imperceptibly into abstraction.

To understand the artistic nomadism as romantic means the longing to reach a place, be it dreaming or searching it for real – intending to be „there“, without knowing where this „there“ is located, always „on the run“, but never really to be „in“. The cottage as a provisional space, as an accommodation an hideout during journeys could symbolize this desire. However Bachelard assumes precisely the smallest cottage to be the biggest source of nativeness, it possesses the same ability of a house, to be a storage of personal memory and past. In Quantius' paintings the cottages are of that ilk, that can be found everywhere, they do not tell something specific about themselves or their surroundings. They become individual and personal merely through observation and projection by viewers. The cottage does not mark a defined place, hence the way, the process to reach another place, be it unknown, utopic or forgotten – marks an irrevocable „here“. Quantius' images convey a deep melancholic feeling, a gentle anticipation or suppressed sureness, that everything is presently in nomadic movement and everything changes continuously, so that any arrival has to remain at some indefinite future date.

Text by Simone Neuenschwander

(1) Gaston Bachelard: *Poetry of space* (1957), Frankfurt/M.: Fischer, 1987.

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