

Jens Asthoff on Tobias Pils

AF artforum.com/print/reviews/201608/tobias-pils-63489

PRINT October 2016



Tobias Pils, *Untitled (flowers)*, 2016, mixed media on canvas, 12' × 6' 8".

Tobias Pils

Captain Petzel

Tobias Pils paints with a reduced palette of black, white, and gray. If at first glance his pictures have a graphic, drawing-like character, however, this turns out to be deceptive: As paintings, they are as opulent as they are subtle. The Austrian artist's recent exhibition demonstrated that he has developed an idiosyncratic pictorial language in which figurative and floral elements seem to have been set loose among latently abstract, free-form ornamental structures such that each of these aspects—representation and abstraction—interpenetrates and interprets the other. The paintings remain, in their complexity, compelling and fluently composed. Traces of the artist's hand are always legible within them; paint is sometimes applied across broad swaths of the canvas in a rapid *alla prima ductus*, and sometimes details are built up in layered *impasto*. Elsewhere, the untreated canvas is left exposed, and its pale beige comes into play as the only “real” color. The austere color scheme often lends Pils's painting a severity that borders on the heroic. In turn, this rigor stands in productive contrast to his willful and subjective gestural marks, which seem forthright and outspoken as they move within the pictorial space without necessarily aiming toward expression.

The kind of subjectivity Pils pursues in his paintings has less to do with an impulse to self-expression than with a desire to work on free poetic forms. He is clearly concerned with compression (*Verdichtung*); one would almost like to say, with poetry (*Dichtung*)—just as if he were making visual haiku. Such poems to go beyond language via linguistic means. Pils has developed a painterly vocabulary that he uses to find the correct emphasis, the right resonance that will open up a new, previously unseen kind of beauty.

There is a certain *chutzpah* in the way Pils does this within a classical genre of painting that is directly associated with beauty: the floral still life. In *Untitled (flowers)* (all works cited, 2016), the sheer size of the painting—the vertical-format canvas measures some twelve by six and a half feet—is already a bold statement in light of the traditional intimacy of the type. In terms of technique, it is a mixture of reductionist brusqueness and fragile elegance: In the lower part of the picture, Pils has created an emphatic visual weight with dominant black tones; two handle-like overhangs, which initially look like eyes, make this part of the canvas also vaguely legible as a jug or a vase. The rest of the picture is varnished white with a small strip of canvas left unpainted along each of the outside edges. Pils has painted gestural lines into the transparent white; they are so delicate as to change the impression of fluid abstraction into something botanical. The color he picked for them is called Payne's gray, and it carries tones of blue that are nearly indigo. In contrast to the solid, angular black in the bottom part of the picture, the striations gently fray into the white—an effect that Pils achieved by priming the back of the canvas beforehand. For the viewer, this mutes the dynamism of the gestural marks in favor of a delicate, organic structure. Alongside the sometimes very large works on canvas, the exhibition also included ink drawings on paper (all *Untitled*). In them, the centrality of process becomes clearer still—and thus sheds light on the richness of the paintings.

—Jens Asthoff