

ARTFORUM

Ellen Gronemeyer

Summer 2011

Galerie Karin Guenther
Hamburg

Berlin-based artist Ellen Gronemeyer doesn't often show her paintings. But that's for good reason: Her pictures take time. She always works them over intensively, and her motifs emerge through this process. The small-format canvases in her recent show, "CDU/CSU" (named for the German center-right political faction), reveal that Gronemeyer, who is constantly developing and refining her artistic techniques, has brought her painting to a high level of compositional density. She presented just eight paintings and one drawing. Some are still, tight-lipped portraits; some retain a more cartoonlike or caricatural mode; and some are near abstractions in which a face can just barely be glimpsed. Portraiture has occupied Gronemeyer for years; again and again, always in different ways, she makes it an occasion to play at figuration within abstraction, combining and merging the two. The way she works human faces out of the material substance of the paint itself, taking her depictions to the point of deformation, often touches on primal and existential themes. Her work might remind you of Jean Fautrier, for example (especially his "*Otages*" [Hostages], 1942-45), Georges Rouault, or Jean Dubuffet.

Gronemeyer's pictures clearly display certain *art brut* attributes, but everything rough and raw about them is also sophisticated and stylized, sometimes bearing the mark of ironic distance. The surfaces of the paintings, which are built up in a tight weave of countless fine brushstrokes, often darkly encrusted, conceal meticulously calibrated variegations of color - an intensity that immediately strikes the eye but only gradually reveals its full complexity. With often delicate pastel shadings and sudden bright specks of color, Gronemeyer purposefully smuggles a sense of artificiality into the archaism of her pictures, and this makes them utterly contemporary. This interweaving is most clearly apparent in *Kandis* (Rock Candy), 2010, the work that deviates most noticeably from the traditional portrait among those included in the show. In it, a cluster of white, black, and occasionally colored lines of virtually dissolves the impression of a surface into a totality of disorienting shapes. A palette of lilac, dark yellow, teal, and maroon is meticulously incorporated into the texture of the weave. Among the small circles that have penetrated this thicket, you can make out perhaps one or two pairs of eyes, though not unambiguously, and so the picture appears to maintain a sense of reticence within an overall abundance.

The small painting *Nirvana*, 2010-11, makes an otherworldly impression, with a delicately worked, tightly woven mass of color. Unlike in *Kandis*, the contours here have almost entirely dissolved: The surface of the image is completely covered in a regular texture of tiny clumps of paint, and the impression of a portrait is created solely by the punctiform application of color - in this case pink, blue, and orange, together with shades of gray - on this compact "paint skin." *Astrobot*, 2012, might, judging by its title, be a science-fiction creature, but at the same time it gives the impression of a cult mask. The oval of the head is neatly fitted into the rectangle of the picture, and both the dark face and the lighter background are richly layered. In the many hued grayish surfaces, luminous colors have been incorporated so that the gray appears bathed in the light of a cool-toned palette that is typical for Gronemeyer. It's only on second glance that one recognizes in *Astrobot* the Janus-head motif that characterizes many of her portraits as ambivalent double figures.

- Jens Asthoff

50 White Street
New York, NY 10013
T 212 226 0070
F 212 226 0079