

GALERIE TSCHUDI

ALAN CHARLTON

It Started with a Chameleon

30 years of collaboration with Galerie Tschudi

27 July – 28 September 2019

Many years ago, as a young artist, Alan Charlton formulated a series of visionary principles of immutable clarity, which he follows unaltered to this day. He liberated his paintings from figuration, illusionism, gesture, theatricality and narration. It was also about countering the traditional image of the painter; he never wanted to become a celebrity painter of the old school, who arrives at the studio, whips out his brush, throws a few brilliant brush strokes on canvas and leaves the rest to his assistants. He didn't want to build a myth around himself, strive for a socially respected position or create paintings that would reveal hidden truths or promise transcendence. Charlton therefore became an artist who – with modesty, but also with unwavering commitment – does everything himself: from the stretcher frame to mounting the canvas to the careful application of colour, from packing up the paintings, tidying and cleaning the studio to organizing shipment. This unshakable concentration, the perfectly skilled handling, the authenticity and care lavished on each individual step of work all contribute to the viewers' intensive and sensual experience when contemplating the final paintings. Alan Charlton's radical reduction to simple materials and procedures, which he carries out again and again with practised perfection, while highly controlled manual skill enables him to intuitively nuance shades of grey and repertoires of form, make each painting personal and unique.

Charlton's career as an artist began in 1969, when he decided to paint one monochrome painting each in green, brown, black, red, white and grey. He was satisfied with all five of his paintings back then, but the grey one exceeded his expectations. Based on this exceptional result he decided from then on only to paint monochromes in grey. That was 50 years ago. He has painted hundreds of canvases since; each as perfect as those that preceded it. For exactly 30 years he has been represented by the Tschudi gallery where he regularly installed exhibitions and found a home among kindred spirits, both as an artist and a human being. On the occasion of this double anniversary, a catalogue has been published with images of Alan Charlton's work over three decades in the spaces of the Tschudi gallery in Glarus and Zuoz. It is a journey through the surprising diversity of these paintings in grey, a body of work which is completely unique in art history.

The radicality with which Charlton practices his painting manifests vividly in this retrospective overview. Throughout, the paintings are grounded, unpretentious, honest, and straightforwardly present. They never repeat themselves, even though they may appear similar at first glance. But the artist's convictions are articulated anew in every single painting, using different words. The dictum "you see what you see", coined by Frank Stella in relation to his Black Paintings, also immediately comes to mind with regard to Alan Charlton's grey paintings, which are determined by his underlying formal decisions: he always repeats the same stretcher frames, measurements and basic shapes. All his measurements derive from the standard size of the wood he uses for his stretcher frames. The artist adopted its width of 4.5 cm as the basic measurement for all his paintings. Each relationship and each measurement – even the gaps within the paintings or the distances among the pieces of multi-part works – can be divided by 4.5. This formal clarity, of course, indicates the fact that these paintings are also about relationships of size and space. As a painter, Alan Charlton approaches this in an unusual way. He does not suggest pictorial or imagined spaces that either depict possible places or devolve into infinity. He anchors viewers in real space and encourages them to think about this space itself and their presence within it.

The relationships between work, architecture and viewers are central to Charlton's work, and he knows how to explore them the best tradition of Minimal Art. Confronted with his huge, multi-part paintings currently on show in the former hayloft in the Tschudi gallery in Zuoz, the dimensions of the

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space in relation to their own presence never remain abstract for the viewers, they perceive it sensually. The heterogeneous texture of the stone walls becomes more prominent and the monochrome grey surfaces of the canvasses begin to have a calming effect. On the other hand, the large works gently dominate the space, the combination of shades of grey leads the viewers' gaze to wander. This effect is triggered by all the multi-part, serial and vertical paintings: they animate blank walls to turn them into dynamic events. Alan Charlton's paintings set the viewer in motion. Almost like a sculptural presence they demand constant changes of perspective – which is essential, not just for the perception of art.

Then there is the monochrome grey, also associated with built up cities, heavy industry, an overcast sky; the colour that subsumes all others within it. It is a colour that can do anything, but is nevertheless considered boring and void of expression. Alan Charlton's paintings defy this image. They show that grey is a colour of infinite facets, a colour that can be endlessly varied without ever dissolving into a different colour range. No other colour can engage the spectrum from warm to cold so profoundly. Charlton exploits these possibilities masterfully and proves their variety through understatement. Paradoxically, it is by holding back that his work dominates entire spaces, shifting their temperature and atmosphere, making the walls cast a luminous glow. Viewers feel simultaneously comforted and challenged by the interplay of space, painting, their own perception and state of mind. In their systematic arrangements and patterns of repetition, these paintings repress anything supposedly creative and spontaneous that might linger in the ego of the painter. Instead, they focus entirely on the perception of the viewers, who at the centre of things become the directors of their own experience. This modesty on the part of the artist is characteristic and can also be interpreted as generosity. For his paintings transform viewers into acute observers; perception becomes a continuous process of re-examining both the self and the surrounding world.

Alan Charlton is one of the few painters who manages to create paintings that do not refer to the painter himself or even primarily to the history of painting. There is no trace or gesture that indicates the personality of the artist, no heavy-handed references to the discourse of painting. These paintings want only one thing: to take their viewers seriously and give them the opportunity for full perception in the here and now.

Lynn Kost