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Abstraction *goes* Disco

How much hedonism can painting tolerate? Can an affair become an image? What can abstraction offer besides its *Erhabenheit*? Other artists have the success; Rochelle Feinstein has the better questions. Now the native New Yorker is finally honored with an extensive retrospective.

"Thinking today, finishing tomorrow", once said Martin Kippenberger, but it was somehow visible in his images, it became a problem when his punk anti-intellectualism turned into a cliché. Although her work shares much of Kippenberger's wit, directness and recklessness, Rochelle Feinstein's problem seems to be quite the opposite, that is, she never quite finishes thinking.

Feinstein's art is a bit impertinent, a challenge, maybe also an expression of a wonderfully misguided career choice: Within the field of conceptual art, where thoughts take precedence, she most certainly would have been welcomed with open arms. But until very recently few in painting could make any use of her work.

Only now, around 70 years of age, a great retrospective is bestowed on her. The of a long misunderstood genius? Of course not! Feinstein rejects the genuflection and asks us to dance.

The first room of the show, which premiered at the Centre d'Arte Contemporain in Geneva, and is now at display at Munich's Lenbachhaus, is decorated in the style of a discotheque from the 1970s. Everyone came: concretion and abstraction, popular culture and art history, the personal and the political. A few pictures lean against the wall, much like they got too exhausted by all the

dancing and therefore toppled over to the side. Others turn their back on us, as if they had nothing to say. Glamour and sex are in the air, the soul singer Barry White whispers salaciously from a video loop. A fan whirrs in another video, spotlights illuminate the images in ever-changing colors. A rotating disco ball is chained in front of a monochromatic black canvas. "Abstraction goes disco," explains Rochelle Feinstein. What is going on here?

It's the magic of the club: On the inside hierarchies will break up, hierarchies between day and night, men and women, you and me, high and low. Contradictions suddenly become endurable. Thus in Feinstein's installations icons of pop (Barry White, Michael Jackson) encounter icons of painting like the black square (Kasimir Malevich, Ad Reinhardt), sex-appeal, hedonism, *Erhabenheit*: What is an icon, what are the conventions it follows? Does it appeal to our gut, our feelings, our mind? Feinstein seems to be less concerned with ironic equations than with a re-working of the surfaces of the iconic; with restoring its inherent magic. Thus the color on her monochromatic black canvas was literally scraped off with her fingernails in order to release the underlying threads of gold and silver which are running down the surface like tears. Grief and glamour are closely related, explains Rochelle Feinstein. But can one confront noble abstraction with so much affection? Counter-question Feinstein: Wasn't Malevich's picture initially supposed to decorate an opera?

The engagement with the history of abstraction and its generous combination with references to pop culture and personal experiences can be understood as one characteristic of Feinstein's oeuvre. She just cannot be reduced to an artistic hallmark. "I have never been interested in ingenuity and stylistic refinement, although these are certainly the criteria by which art is usually taught, analyzed and perceived", explains Feinstein. "This feels unnatural to me, it doesn't correspond to the way I think about painting."

Hence it doesn't seem surprising that the art market had little use for Feinstein's work. Whoever expects art to possess the security of a safe investment, or, the steady profit development of the stock exchange, will most certainly not bank on this anarchist, because she also tends to blunder. As an example, a collector knocked on her door by the end of the 1990s. Feinstein initially showed him gigantic group of unsold art works; he immediately cut and ran – she got the idea for her picture *Before and After* – which depicts her storage: Self-demolition as a creative act.

And Feinstein even goes further. In *The Estate of Rochelle F.* (2010) she presents her own "pre-posthumous" estate. The work was created as a reaction to the financial crisis, Feinstein clarifies, when she found herself forced to give up one of her archives simply because she couldn't afford the rent any longer. "I wanted to know: What does the recession mean for people, what does it mean for me as a painter? What does it mean to make a living?" She drew together unfinished works of art, drafts, ephemera, photographs, and newspaper in order to create something new. Her "estate", she explains, links works from 1995 to 2009 to form a "non-stylistic style."

Feinstein, who was born in New York in 1947 and who kind of resembles Susan Sontag given her grey streaks in her otherwise black hair (she doesn't want to be photographed for this essay), initially came to painting through evening courses. In the late-1960s, when the medium was still under the spell of Abstract Expressionism, Feinstein worked for the advertisement agency Doyle Dane Bernbach, which served as a model for the TV series "Mad Men". Making money during the day, dabbling with the canvas at night. "Commercial illustration is based on the direct exchange between the creators, the product, the client, and the consumer. But painting, it seemed to be behind a thick wall, but I was unbelievably attracted to it. I didn't understand its conventions, and I am basically still trying to decipher its incredible possibilities."

Feinstein fights that battle alone. Neither as a student at Pratt Institute in Brooklyn or the University of Minnesota nor as a professor of painting at Yale, where she teaches since 1994, could she reconcile with the idea of a "signature style" or of attaching to a specific art movement. Conceptual art: For Feinstein completely correct in its revolt against the fetish art, but she wanted to incorporate this thought process into painting itself. The political activism of the women's movement: For Feinstein absolutely worthy of support, but she didn't want her art to be usurped by it.

Feinstein finished "Flag" in 1993, a work that alludes to Jasper John's eponymous painting. Here, Feinstein combines the typical modernist grid with a common, off-the-shelf dishtowel, that she incorporated in the picture's bottom right corner.

As some female artists identified this gesture as a feminist statement, Feinstein reacted impatiently and created a new work. Her *Flag* (1993) picture is now shown alongside a painting composed of reproductions of other works, placed into plastic bags that are attached onto the canvas, much like a chronological postcard rack. The work's title: *Find Your Own Damn Voice* (1994).

Her work titles consistently pose such demands. *Make it Behave* (1990) for example; it shows a reddish square that somewhat maladroitly surrounds the canvas, as if Feinstein isn't fully in control of the color field painting's heroic gesture. Or *Smile* (1994), in which she combines the characteristic orange of the smiley-symbol with the well-known smile of Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa*. Who is addressed here? Who exercises one's authority: the artist or the spectator? Are we the audience or does the painting speak to itself?

Two languages, two systems are conflicting here. On the one hand it is the language of everyday life as "something that is common and accessible to everyone, something that exists independent of painting", as Feinstein elaborates. On the other hand there is the history of painting, the conventions of its composition, the modes of perception that it imposes on us: Who is this *Mona Lisa* to tell us how to look at her?

At least since the 1980s painters have sabotaged the idea of pure abstraction, as Feinstein concedes: "There was conceptual abstraction, the Neo-Geo-Movement, contaminations of "pure" painting. But for me they still followed the same ground rules for abstraction. That wasn't enough; I didn't just want to expand the history of art, I wanted – and this might sound a little presumptuous – a systematic change. I wanted the painting to originate from life and to reverberate to life in return."

Painting as a chronicle for stories like this one: During the mid-80s to the beginning of the 90s, Feinstein's had a boyfriend. They separated, and she learned shortly thereafter that he was a serial philanderer, cheating in NY, across the US, and in Europe. Those events that didn't deter him from sending Feinstein an electricity bill of 23 USD, asking pay her half of this amount, and signing this letter "Love, Paul." Her picture "Something for Everyone" uses an airline map to diagram and index this betrayal.

Gradually, Feinstein's generic principal becomes clearer now. She translates everyday feelings into the language of abstraction. Recalling Mondrian, Malevich, Rothko, Reinhardt, and Agnes Martin she reexamines what their repertoire of forms can offer a today's New York woman of the 21st century beyond the noble ideal of revolution, *Erhabenheit* and transcendence. Can abstraction embody banal feelings like jealousy, love, sex, and anger?

Stylistic incoherence becomes a protective cloak: only that way can Feinstein protect the feeling from kitsch, the political from the gesture, the painterly from drying up. Feinstein knows that art is bigger than her. That's the reason why every thought, as soon as being articulated, and every image, as soon as being painted, must be revisited anew.

"People often ask me: What is your favorite piece?", Feinstein recalls. "I can never answer that. If a piece does its job, if it functions, then I am satisfied."

Which job?

"Art History organizes, neatens, pigeonholes our experiences and feelings. In life, sometimes we oppress and sometimes we are oppressed. I want to find the terrain where both collide."

Feinstein loves painting, that's why she demands everything from it. She rejects old myths, opens them up for new meanings; she studies the material's elasticity, negotiates which landscapes she can possibly cover based on her capacities. *Geography* was realized in 1993/1994 as Feinstein was surrounded by grief and death. The AIDS-crisis was at its peak, "it was during that time", as she phrases it, "a condom burst during intercourse." Feinstein reached for a bucket of white paint and repeatedly emptying it over a canvas to see if it rips apart. It was tight, but the canvas held up.