

A Meditation on the History of Painting

abstract of the catalogue text

[...] Van Ofen's historical meditation, which turns not only into essentializing/despairing repetitions but, even further, into the linguistic, analytical dissipation of the archetypes of nineteenth-century history painting, had started with the paintings he exhibited in 2012 at the Johnen Gallery in Berlin, all of which purposely referenced works by the German painter, Anton von Werner. The meaning of those paintings lay not only in the abolition of their scene, reduced to a hermetic series of signs, but also in the excerption from von Werner's originals of passages of color to which the artist assigned a semiotic/political value. [...]

For both groups of works (Anton von Werner in Berlin and *Germania und Italia* in Reggio Emilia), van Ofen has written a statement that should be considered an integral element of the pictorial work since each set of canvases has been conceived as a "monographic exhibition." That doesn't imply he considers the two groups simply painting installations, assemblages in which it is the physical positioning of the canvases in space that guarantees their togetherness, their iconic inseparability; rather, it suggests that the creative process that has generated the canvases began with an idea that remains intrinsic to each individual piece without producing any lessening of their visual singularity and formal inventiveness. [...]

Since what has remained in von Ofen's canvases of the history of von Werner's history paintings is mainly the spur to a meditation on, and an investigation of, the history of painting which results in the symbolic destruction of an archetype, it follows that van Ofen has indeed considered those *Historiengemälde* not as archetypes in the strict sense of the term, but sees them as mere visual accounts of a social/political phenomenology with which the artist clearly negates any empathy, with which his painting rejects any identification whatsoever. As he further wrote with regard to the von Werner pictures he investigated in *Germania und Italia*, for him they constitute an "artistic testimony of political euphoria" to be dissected through an analysis of the iconography of power they inscribe. [...]

For the exhibition project, *Germania und Italia*, van Ofen has once more adopted and confirmed the monographic concept, once more thinking of the sequence of works in the unitary terms of a politics and an analytics of painting. [...]

Van Ofen has focused his pictorial investigation on the paintings that accompanied the process of national formation that was occurring parallel in the two countries during the second half of the nineteenth century. In his transcription, or rather, transdepiction of the forming of the German nation, he has continued however to reference the Will to Empire as it appears in von Werner's paintings, insisting therefore on the political and military leaders' uniforms as heraldic signs of Power; while for the Italian side of the story he has rather dwelt on pictures that described the fighting of large groups of combatants, evoking the Risorgimento's battles as both landscapes and deathscapes. He has further presented Hayez's Romantic allegory as a pendant to Overbeck's Neoclassical allegory, since the Italian one, probably due to its character of meditation, seemed to offer to the German artist a model with which he could empathize rather than merely a corpse to vivisect.

For Germania und Italia, too. Van Ofen has written an introductory statement, which is not so much a declaration of thematic intentions as an invitation to the viewer to posit the canvases in a preordained, conceptual space - at once real and abstract - within which each individual painting is located, thus becoming a Metahistoriengemälde, a painting of metahistory. The text functions as a verbal picture that orients the pictorial objects:

What was first manifest in the writings of Tacitus had not ceased in the fateful concordance that ended in World War II. This exhibition sheds light upon a different period of political synchronicity - the late coming into being of a nation-state in Germany and Italy in the nineteenth century. Illuminating this historical development, objects of artistic testimony have been amassed and reconsidered by Michael van Ofen, a German painter born in 1956. Inherent aspects of these artifacts, explored in comprehensive artistic practice, will serve in this public presentation to offer a notion of the orchestration that joins political might and public euphoria from the past to the present of the contemporary. [Michael van Ofen]

Mario Diacono