

GALERIE MAÏA MULLER

MONIKA MICHALKO

VEYLON

02.06.2018 – 21.07.2018



Maïa Muller is pleased to present VEYLON, Monika Michalko's first solo show in France.

Born 1982 in Sokolov, Czech Republic. Lives and works in Colombo, Sri Lanka and Berlin, Germany
Monika Michalko studied from 2003 to 2009 in the class of Norbert Schwontkowski at the University of Fine Arts of Hamburg. Her dreamlike landscapes resonate with echoes of classical modernism, from Malevich to Klee, but also references to Joan Miró and brothers Gert and Uwe Tobias. The artist's colourful paintings on wooden panels are furthermore influenced by her travels to Egypt, India and Turkey, particularly with regard to ornamentation and architectural forms. Michalko's work was shown at Kunsthau Hamburg in 2013, Kunsthau Jesteburg in 2016 and at Art Cologne in 2016.

A thousand stars Jens Asthoff

Images conquer the room, sprawl over the floor and occupy individual segments of wall, interspersed with other, classical paintings on canvas. Exhibitions by Monika Michalko are often extensive ensembles, painting installations playfully extending into the space. The presentation of her paintings, – mostly oil but sometimes also oil pastels on canvas – is thus complemented and expanded, integrated into spatial contexts, their narrative continued and intensified. This is achieved, among others, by means of drapings or hangings of coloured textiles and mural paintings, and even cinematic and sculptural elements have on occasion been used in her exhibitions. Sometimes she adds floor pieces sewn from colourful fabrics (in this exhibition, she uses for the first time coloured PVC film), which are reminiscent of abstract image carpets and whose ornamentation speaks the same language as her painting while retaining their very own objectual character. At Galerie Maïa Muller she has also primed a wall with wallpaper – a three-by-four-meter print of a pencil drawing – on which she has placed individual paintings. The drawing becomes a second-order pictorial medium that intervenes in the rhythm and motifs of the painting: a quasi-scenic interplay of forms and objects typical of Michalko's work, which, always with a dash of spontaneity, produces surprising formal associations. But the artist does not merely use these techniques to examine formal questions of presentation. In line with her very own artistic programme, she is interested in entwinement, condensation and reflection – in other words, in an all-round conversation between images and pictorial elements. The exhibition thus becomes a alkable Gesamtkunstwerk, where visitors continually discover new details – just as in the paintings themselves.

In her paintings, Michalko proceeds from a simple, abstract formal vocabulary: triangles, rectangles, lines, circles, semicircles, oval and drop shapes, occasionally accompanied by words or concise sentences in painted typography. Meandering through the image as ornamented rhythms, plant-like motifs or exuberant layers, all these elements combine into an assertive organic ornamental order – which is then joyfully disrupted, either through pure abstraction, that is, in the form of dynamic asymmetries that lend these images their imponderable, contradictory and charming coherence, or – and this is only seemingly paradoxical – by venturing into the realm of the figuration. But more on this later.

The first strategy – namely, the purely non-figurative use of the artist's painterly vocabulary – can for instance be observed in the large format *I Thought I Am Your Friend* (2017), an abstract painting that stages the encounter of cloud-like pictorial elements and an area composed of rectangular, circular and triangular fields. The inner structural order of both zones is organically irregular, but they behave towards each other in a disparate manner that creates a sense of tension. The cloudy areas, intense blue, red, black, partly magenta and sulphurous yellowish-green hues in the upper third of the image, appear

simultaneously magnificent and threatening, while tones of the same colour family, though much paler, are found in the lower gridded fields. The transitional zone is occupied by a seemingly floating, delicate lattice of coloured lines. Partly curved and partly right-angled, almost all of them seem loosely entwined. They form a lyrical element that behaves differently from the other pictorial actors – they are reminiscent of melodic lines, the abstract expression of a polyphonic conversation or the outline of possible melancholy. Like all of Michalko's works, however, this painting can also be considered purely in terms of its formal language, as an orphic abstract composition that develops a characteristic aesthetic tension from astonishing compositional manoeuvres and breaks.

On the Way to Far East (2017) works in a similar, though somewhat more disruptive manner: in a sequence typical of Michalko's work, abstract elements are reinterpreted into decorum by way of a closed sequence of small, glaring to dirty colour fields enclosing the image as an irregular frame. In the zone thus outlined, a multitude of flat pictorial elements unfold, which are predominantly abstract but can also be read figuratively, and often even both: three corked bottles at the bottom right, for instance, are recognisable as abstract objects; operating in a semantic space, on the other hand, are the three, four shapes composed of bottles, bowls, spheres and other forms which, delicately balancing upon each another, become an abstract figure when read vertically – as a mixture of things and forms, they amalgamate both modes of representation: the circle is a head, the bottle shape or triangle becomes a supporting shoulder. Michalko has embedded these quasi-figures in an environment of small, roughly executed pale shapes and colour fields. Often streaking out on their edges and fading into white, the background formations dissolve into a latently chaotic vibration that taints the abstract arrangement of pictorial elements with imponderability.

The Radiant Child (2017) too is such a characteristic intermediate zone between abstract and figurative representation, to which typographic elements have here been added: slightly to the right of the centre we see elongated forms, a black circle and a hat-shaped or tuft-like pointy shape loosely assembled into a puppet-like figure reminiscent of the homunculus which, incidentally, reappears in *Him Again* (2018). As though placed in a stage-like arrangement of dotted, floral or even tectonic colour shapes, it seems to beckon the beholder. On a bulbous oval shape to its left, the title of the painting becomes part of the composition, proclaiming that here stands the 'radiant child' in the midst of a crowded, yet strangely secluded, indeed isolated world.

Paintings such as *The Believers*, *Tempel*, *Till* or *Kotte House* (all 2018) lean more strongly, more obviously towards figuration. They are examples of Michalko's ability to develop diverse, yet anything but abstract genres such as still life, figure, interior, landscape and portrait entirely out of her characteristically flat ornamental imagery. In the foreground of *The Believers*, for instance, we see a small group of figures in opulent traditional costumes: dresses, coats and hats composed of abstract shapes – quite similar to *On the Way to Far East*, yet more clearly anthropomorphic in design. In the background, playfully overlapping triangular and rectangular fields assemble into the image of a building, while green plant shapes suggest amorphous, tropical growth; and by placing a pale yellow circle, slightly hidden in the abstract branches on the top right, Michalko manages to transform the image, created from strong but predominantly dark colours, into a nocturnal moonlight scenario. The architecture in *Tempel* is formed of similar plane layers of shapes, while *Kotte House* constructs a complete interior from both potentially figurative and abstract shapes – which, in turn, with its carpet, object and material drapings, resembles Michalko's arrangements of objects in the exhibition space.

The seemingly naive, folkloristic trait in Michalko's formal vocabulary, as well as her characteristically bright colours, often set on a dark background, are partly owed to biographical-regional influences: Michalko was born in Czechoslovakia (in today's Czech Republic) and has been appropriating aspects of local folk art early on in her work. Her more recent influences originate from a completely different part of the world: after travelling to India in 2013, Michalko decided to settle for a while in Sri Lanka. In the country's everyday culture, facades, walls, doors or even cars are brightly coloured, as are people's clothes, their saris and sarongs: 'In some places, it really felt as though I was running through my own paintings and that wherever you look, all is art', explained the artist in a conversation. 'Particularly the colours, but also temples and urban architecture, have left a long-lasting impression on my thoughts and feelings.' This is directly corroborated by individual motifs and titles: the previously mentioned *Kotte House*, for instance, refers to Pita Kotte, a neighbourhood in Colombo where the artist lives with her family. Or by *It's Getting Dark in Nugegoda* (2018), a small, shining colour-field composition on a backdrop of impenetrable darkness representing a row of houses in the neighbourhood of the same name. In the lower part of the image, a band of brightly coloured circles crosses the scene, while upward lines, semicircular structures and drop shapes let architectural details dissolve into rough abstraction; on the top edge of the image, as though hidden among brown garlands of clouds, the moon hangs over the city, a lightless circle, half gray, half black. *Borella* (2018) too refers to a district in Colombo by title. This abstract composition of complex layers of colour forms is composed like a painting in the painting. Although it steers clear of figuration, the colours of the city, the doors, walls and facades, here seem to culminate in a single condensed perception. The overlapping of forms, which is reminiscent of Concrete artists such as Ib Geertsen or Poul Gernes, both subtly and vaguely plays with suggestions of letters, whose meaning, of course, cannot be deciphered.

Michalko often uses typography as an autonomous formal element. This is epitomised by the typographic poster bearing the inscription 'Veylon' and the key exhibition dates, which the artist has painted specifically for this occasion. And in *Deine Augen* (2017) typography is even the main topic. Set on an indeterminately dark, cloud-ridden background, shapes and letters float weightlessly in the pictorial space; a cluster of concentric lines seems to hold some of back them like balloons, yet without creating any clear sense of order. The letters are highly individualised according to rhythm, form and colour, and removed from any obvious typographic alignment, which consciously works against the idea of readability. It is with some delay, while reading, that viewers realise that the painting says more than its title. It reads 'Deine Augen', and from the remaining letters one slowly puts together the words 'a thousand stars'. An artistic declaration of love – addressed to a specific person? Or, in the bigger scheme of things, to the Other, the You in whom we recognise ourselves? In the end, a painterly homage to seeing as such?

Jens Asthoff lives and works as a freelance writer, critic, editor and translator in Hamburg, Germany. He studied philosophy and German languages/literature in Freiburg and Hamburg. He is a member of *aica* (International Association of Art Critics) and writes a. o. for magazines such as *Artforum*, *Camera Austria*, *Kunstforum*, and contributions to catalogues. He is the editor of *Be magazine*, published by Künstlerhaus Bethanien, Berlin.