

Press release

Erik Schmidt | *Rays around you*

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A dense mesh of color dominates the latest paintings by Erik Schmidt. Small areas of pigment and moments of looming color are put together like a jigsaw puzzle with strong lines in between – and then: white. Many of the paintings, which were inspired by the time Schmidt spent in Japan in 2015, shows what one sees if he were to gaze upwards at an intersection: an impenetrable, unattractive thicket of the utility lines of a megalopolis. Schmidt pursues these nodes in increasingly strong abstraction. The cables, the colorful building facades, the gaudy advertisements are certainly recognizable, yet dissolve the more one delves into the image, gradually becoming pure painting. Erik Schmidt makes his interest in structure, geometry, and not least, color as material, almost physically palpable. His paintings are equally always reflections about painting itself – about color, surface and, influenced by his recent engagement with the tradition of Japanese art – line. Schmidt's current works are more graphic than his paintings to date: the thick paint sometimes floats, scattered above white surfaces, leaving the ground and sometimes even the field completely. There is no tradition of painting as we know it in Japan.

When viewing the work, however, the motif always comes into the foreground like in a kinegram and the strong, aligning straight lines that emphasize steep verticals as well as wild masses of entangled color, allowing one to feel the vertigo that may have captured the artist walking the streets of Tokyo.

By contrast, Schmidt comes closer to individuals in paintings like *Takashi Bq*, whose title comprises a Japanese forename with the abbreviation for the unit Becquerel. He selects individuals from the massive flows of people on the street or in the densely packed subways and dedicates small, close-up portraits to them. He shows them immersed in the rhythms of their workday, with briefcase and smartphone. The paintings have an even stronger graphic quality than the architectural compositions. Color fields sometimes consist of only two or three thick juxtaposed strokes, while he defines faces and hands almost exclusively through their outlines, which derive their color and modeling through minimal colored areas. Painting that limits itself to what matters.

The fascinated, inquiring gaze that a stranger directs towards the city and another culture is also reflected in Schmidt's video *Cut/Uncut*, which he filmed towards the end of his time in Japan. The protagonist – who as in Schmidt's earlier films is the artist himself – walks through Tokyo, eats, drinks, and plays on slot machines. He takes part in everyday life and yet does not blend in so well with the society that is visible around him. Towards the middle of the video, the protagonist cuts his suit in a kind of self-invented ceremony in a Japanese teahouse, violently and precisely ripping it to shreds while it is still on his body. Using ties and belts, he finally transforms the suit into a Japanese seeming robe.

The protagonist's different clothing and the particular environment that he moves within enter into close substantive associations – from austerity and accuracy up until complete dissolution and freedom – which is far from being achieved with the new uniform.

As in his oeuvre to date, Erik Schmidt approaches this complex blend of motifs in different media. The same subject inspires the artistic approach he adopts with each medium; the results could exist without each other, yet enhance their effect on one another.

Schmidt interweaves such varied “materials” as personal observations of everyday life through western eyes, considerations of traditional Japanese art, samurai films, or Yoko Ono's *Cut Piece* – which relates to the title of the video – with his own highly individualized visual language to create a new narrative about Japan, as it appears to a European who seems as educated as he is curious. Eclectic in a thoroughly positive sense.

In relation to Japan, the title *Rays around you* as well as the titles of the individual paintings, brings to mind the reactor catastrophe at Fukushima. The cables depicted in the paintings and the smartphones the people portrayed in the portraits and drawings hold in their hands, take this association further. And nonetheless, the graphic qualities of the works often give form to a completely different, positively charged image of rays. The individual brush strokes define some areas especially, while embracing others almost affectionately and – alongside the association of dangerous radiation – also gesture towards invisible auras or warming solar rays.

-Amely Deiss

Erik Schmidt (b. 1968, Herford) lives and works in Berlin and is since 1999 represented by carlier | gebauer. He has participated in solo exhibitions at international institutions such as Leopold-Hoesch-Museum, Düren; Haus am Waldsee, Berlin; MARTa Herford; and in group shows at Kunsthalle Hamburg; Hamburger Bahnhof, Berlin; Artists Space, New York; Marta Herford; Museum Morsbroich; KW Institute for Contemporary Art, Berlin; Matsumoto City Museum of Art, Japan; and Museum der Moderne, Salzburg; a.o.