

Proportional Line  
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Last Decade

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edited by Necmi Sönmez

SKIRA



Untitled, 2000, oil on canvas, 110 x 200 cm



Untitled, 2000, oil on canvas, 100 x 80 cm



Untitled, 2000, oil on canvas, 200 x 130 cm



Untitled, 2000, oil on canvas, 100 x 80 cm



Untitled, 2000, oil on canvas, 100 x 80 cm

Previous reception of Kemal Seyhan's work has tended to hinge almost exclusively on its self-referentiality and autonomy, even though there are clear art-historical references and attributes.

Levent Calikoglu, a well-known Turkish curator, once noted that Kemal Seyhan's works "can only be evaluated in a context of what comes before and after them"<sup>1</sup>, yet does not specify exactly what that context is. So this reception history requires us to take a brief look both at Kemal Seyhan's spiritual predecessors and at his contemporaries. If we lack knowledge about the historicity of the concepts, methods and assumptions emerging at various stages of the development of painting, we will only have a limited understanding of artworks and we will certainly not be in a position to judge them.

Writings about Kemal Seyhan have – to the best of my knowledge – consisted mainly of well-informed, insightful descriptions to which little can be added. It is likely that these critics based the interpretation of their task primarily on the artist's own approach, a self-referential development within the work, of the medium of painting! We know all too well that autonomy is always relative, every form of art is fundamentally contextual in terms of content, form and media – in other words, embedded in larger narratives and broader contexts. Since the end of the Modernist project, artistic freedom has been limited to a choice of position, meaning that artists can either choose whether to fit in here or there, in-between or on the fringes of phenomena; or alternatively, to opt for the new terrain of a "broader definition of art." However, there is no unoccupied terrain anymore and dreams of creating something wholly original definitely belong to the past.

The reduction of Kemal Seyhan's painting is based upon the assumptions, concepts and methods formulated by modern artists in the 1960s. Although he is by no means an austere purist nor a devoted modernist, his work in fact reflects that he belongs to the first generation of artists entirely associated to postmodernism. It is worth taking a closer look at this apparent contradiction, given that postmodern thought is critical of both the aesthetics and the assumptions of Modernism. Seyhan's work, however, revolves around such assumptions as abstraction, the problem of the image and the

painting in the classical sense. His position, which is not necessarily self-evident for an artist born and raised in Central Anatolia, is explained by his biography, which is far from unusual in times of globalization and multiculturalism: He lived in Vienna for 20 years, studied in Istanbul and Vienna, and lives and works in both cities today. Not surprisingly, Modernism and Abstraction belong to his multicultural world view. The humanist aspects of Modernism – like the dream of overcoming national and cultural borders through the development of a universal language of art, Abstraction – will have made a significant contribution to determining the early choice of direction of this social liberal and politically active artist.

#### Infinite Possibilities

However Seyhan had a long way to go before reaching his final decision to make the materials and processes of painting the sole point of departure and main focus of his art. After completing his art studies in Vienna (1987 to 1996), it was to take him about a decade, and his path was paved with doubts and errors, steps forward and steps backwards. As luck would have it, he found himself in the middle of the *Neue Malerei* (New Painting), a recent Central European art movement that operated without dogmatism between the Figurative and Abstraction, yet still contrived to free new energies and break down routinized academic approaches. The movement attracted a talented generation of Austrian painters of more or less the same age as Seyhan: the so-called *Junge Wilde*<sup>2</sup> (Young Savages) who, alongside a conceptual fraction around Franz West and Heimo Zobernig, dominated the contemporary Austrian art scene at that time. Their impact is still felt in the sphere of painting to this day. Kemal Seyhan also participated in similar processes of self-discovery with his contemporaries, being exposed to a wide range of different influences, seeking and discarding. Like his fellow artists he refused to seek refuge from the death of abstract painting – permanently heralded but never actually transpiring – by indulging in irony or in various playful, little, open-ended art forms under the guise of a broader concept of painting. He does not believe in an alternative to the medium of painting in the strict

<sup>1</sup> Levent Calikoglu, "In Gedanken auf einem Weg voranschreiten, das Handeln dem Bild widmen", in *Kemal Seyhan*, exhibition catalogue, Milli Reasürans art gallery, Istanbul 2005 (here, in translation).

<sup>2</sup> The "Neue Wilde" was the name given to an artistic counter-movement opposed to the reductionist positions of the avant-garde and to conceptual art that formed in 1978 in Germany, later spreading to Austria; among its proponents were artists like Siegfried Anzinger, Gunter Damisch, Herbert Brandl, Hubert Scheibl, and Otto Zitko – although they never regarded themselves as part of a group.

sense. As his biography shows, his talents and accomplishments were certainly noted, acknowledged, and even rewarded during his early career as an artist in Vienna.

Seyhan himself does not share this high opinion of his early period. He has painted over much of this work and few early pieces still survive. He would prefer these works not to be shown any more and considers his career to have officially begun around 2000, the period of his compacted paintings on canvas. However, it is worth taking a closer look at how he developed what has now become his trademark, stringent and uncompromising style. All of his early works share the same emphatic striving for an honest, uncontrived and direct approach, and for a visualization of the painting processes. They tend to fluctuate between works adopting an open, part-lyrical, part-expressively gestural, Informal approach typical of the time, and early experiments aiming to achieve a monochrome flatness and that are often very close to his later works. In fact, all the key features of his mature work are to be found, in an inchoate form, in his early works – although the pictorial representations were still random, constantly changing, indecisive.

This indecision is also mentioned by Friedhelm Mennekes, a prominent man of the church, patron of the arts and lecturer at the University of Applied Arts in Vienna<sup>3</sup>. In 1993, describing two large-format abstract panels, which he had commissioned from Seyhan as replacement altarpieces for St Michael's Church in Vienna, he wrote: "This painting lives from the contrast between design and its negation. At its most successful it evokes its own open reality. Rather than attempting to establish a definitive formulation, it merely seeks to indicate a formal direction pointing towards the dimension of infinite possibilities – for the painter as well as for the viewer. What emerges are the limits of the colors themselves as they sink into non-colors and re-appear as new values, with the appropriate form asserting itself in-between." Mennekes perceptively notes that "the formal direction" still points towards the "dimension of infinite possibilities."

## The Watershed

Seyhan subsequently began to narrow down his possibilities. The artist increasingly considered that a clear position was to be found by starting more radically at the roots of painting. It was precisely in the contrast with the dominant postmodern crossover between aesthetics and the flood of images that the radicalness of a real, physically tangible painting revealing its creation process primarily, or even exclusively, in every detail must have become apparent to him. However, Kemal Seyhan did not simply decide to take up his own specific, somehow "personal", narrative for the history of painting. In line with his character and *modus operandi*, his new direction was not based primarily on rational considerations but developed gradually and ultimately inevitably out of his actual work process. In countless attempts, their failure and success, Seyhan eventually came across the perspectives and principles – the latter apparently lacking an expiry date – introduced in the 1960s by the Analytical Painting of Robert Ryman, Ad Reinhardt, and others, then continued by the Radical Painting of a group revolving around Marcia Hafif, Joseph Marioni and Günter Umberg.

In retrospect, rather than being surprising Seyhan's thematic focus on the compression of the painting's surface and on grid structuring around 2000 is all the more consistent. A number of his quite early compositions involved filling large format surfaces by superimposing applications of pigment and structures mostly built up out of seemingly handwritten informal marks, occasionally also using a paintbrush or palette knife to layer vertical and horizontal strokes – alternating between light shades on dark, or dark shades on light grounds (1994 and 1996). These early paintings also concentrate on demonstrating the painting process, while their compositional aspirations are generally limited to the relationship between the painting and the still barely identifiable background, even if both are closely intermeshed. Something that had previously already existed to some extent, although then combined with a free approach to painting, now became a systematic method. He began to use only horizontal and vertical strokes of the brush or palette knife to fill surfaces right to the edge, focusing the viewer's attention solely on the nature of the materials and on the painting processes inspired by them. In order to avoid the distracting issue of composition, these works are dominated by mostly homogeneous surface structures and a tendency to work monochromatically. When more colors and

shades are used, they are usually applied in layers, so that even when there are several colors the impression is dominated by a monochrome effect.

As a result, Seyhan found himself venturing into the narrow, historically charged field of the monochrome, or monochrome structural painting. He was no more bothered by the fact that two postwar generations had explored this field of analytical painting than his generation was by its own antecedents – Kazimir Malevich, Alexander Rodchenko, Yves Klein. He deliberately took up what had now become a classical position without feeling in any way bound by Modernism's laws of purity – as his later development shows. He began by further restricting his creative scope to the use of grids, another Modernist structural design element, while completely discarding its idol – the originality of fundamental reinvention. Yet he continued to believe in the basically inexhaustible expressive possibilities of pure painting, that is, in the continuing possibility of finding new answers to old questions – on the grounds of the uniqueness of artistic individuals and their specific and different experiences at different times and in different places.

In 1981, Marcia Hafif, the theorist of Radical Painting, described the method that she employed to create a monochrome structural painting. Not only did her words read like an instruction manual for Kemal Seyhan's works of that time, they could just as well have been written by Robert Ryman himself two decades earlier: "Paintings, hand painted surfaces, are composed more or less evidently of a series of brushstrokes... Meaning in these strokes, and consequently in the painting, derives from the method of organisation of the strokes together with the personal touch of the artist."<sup>4</sup> This simple set of rules lends itself extraordinarily well to the verification of reports of the fatigue or even of the death of formalist art. Which distinctions and personal interpretations were and are still possible in the context of such drastic constraints? Even if the additional demand is made for a horizontal-vertical grid-like application of paint – a demand met by both painters – the differences are still remarkable, even between the leading ideologists of the pure doctrine. Firstly, in their interpretation and secondly in the visual appearance of their works. Ryman's "personal touch" evidently consists in concentrating solely on the process and neglecting the color, while Hafif's lies in a total focus on the impact of color. Personal touch and rigour, as well as the painterly quality of both concepts, the analytical as much as the radical, can

only fully reveal themselves in series and groups of paintings or in broader contexts. While this applies to almost every reductionist painter, it only applies to Kemal Seyhan to a limited extent. He does not think in terms of an "Inventory"<sup>5</sup> series, only in terms of autonomous individual works. Nevertheless he became positively engrossed in the theme of monochrome structural painting, and continues to draw upon it today. This theme became a constant, the backbone of a far more extensive, complex oeuvre that was not serial in nature but characterized by breaks, interruptions, leaps, reviews and development. In comparison to the work of the founders cited above, Seyhan's still demonstrative painterly handwriting at the beginning of the 2000s – an impasto application of paint with strong strokes – creates correspondingly rough, strongly structured and irregular surfaces, which may well still be the after-effects of the heritage of the Neue Wilde and their claim to subjectivity. Overall, these surfaces represent only one of the many facets of a far broader spectrum, at the other end of which stands a meditative, homogeneous, monochrome surface glowing from within. A formal constant, however – again contrasting with the small and medium formats of the genre's founders – is the intense physical presence emanating from large to monumental formats and material density of Seyhan's paintings. No longer dispassionately cool objects, these paintings grow to the size of walls, they close off rooms and lock the observer in.

Seyhan compares his work process to that of an Ottoman military band – two steps forward, two steps back; instead of steering towards a goal or an endpoint, at every stage of his progress he is focusing exclusively upon the essence, upon the creative process. He creates individual pieces in series, so to speak, single painting after single painting containing invariably independent subjects born out of inner necessity. Which is why it is so hard to identify universally applicable, defining characteristics for his works, even though as a whole they form one unique, evocative family in terms of atmosphere. The most striking "personal touch" of Seyhan is without any doubt his fundamental decision to opt for a grid-like horizontal-vertical application of paint, considering this the simplest, most natural way to fully cover a surface. Grid structures have a material equivalence in the weave of the support, creating contrasts and correspondences with it. Grids can also dissolve, shift into patterns, become flat or linear, open or dense. Grids are both a guideline and

<sup>3</sup> Friedhelm Mennekes SJ: German Catholic theologian, priest and art expert, art theorist, successful exhibition organizer, promoter of art as a sponsor of young artists; numerous guest professorships, including at the University of Applied Arts in Vienna.

<sup>4</sup> Marcia Hafif, in *Art in America*, New York, 1981.

<sup>5</sup> Marcia Hafif, in Kunst-und Museumsverein Wuppertal, Kunsthalle Barmen, Barmen 1994. "In 1972 I began a long-term project that I saw as an inventory of the methods and materials of traditional Western painting. I was feeling frustrated in my search for further innovations in abstract painting and decided to stop looking for them and to start working my way through all the existing elements of painting." (Here, in translation.)

an inexhaustible theme. Inseparably linked to this distinctive approach to the application of paint is his use of multiple layers, the number of which can produce transparency or thickness, mostly open or hermetically sealed surfaces that may be matte or glossy, flat or rough. The final application of paint in parallel strokes of the brush or palette knife determines the directionality – horizontality or verticality – of a painting, which can be emphasized or counteracted by opting for either portrait or landscape formats.

This outline provides only a rough idea of the directions and possibilities opened up by Kemal Seyhan's artistic search and only with regard to his signature genre, his more or less monochrome, large-format structural paintings. Missing from the above outline is the spectrum of colors and tonal values that he has developed in a partial but typically distinctive manner in the inexhaustible field of analytical painting. How many colors and how many shades of grey can the human eye distinguish? It is well beyond the scope of this piece to explore the development of this body of work from 2000 to the present. Not even touched upon is the key theme of the compositions in the context of analytical painting, or his highly complex, dense, experimental works on paper, or in small formats using a wide range of materials, tools and painting processes. Such works reveal a different, highly subtle painterly world hinting at infinite potential, and are equal in every way to his large formats.

References, or "What You See Is What You See"  
(Frank Stella)

"He offers the viewers of his works no surface for projection or association, no illusionary spaces, only compositions with finely graduated tones and an intense physical presence" was one critical response to a show of Robert Ryman's works. Although these words could equally be applied to Kemal Seyhan, the similarities end here because he believes that even autonomous painting by no means excludes complex, underlying layers of meaning. Nor are references to the visible world excluded, which is the shared experience upon which abstraction bases its ability to communicate. In addition to natural experiences, so-called self-referential paintings may also include artistic and cultural experiences on both a visual and an emotional level; this is something that many of Kemal Seyhan's paintings do explicitly, it has become a "contextual idiosyncrasy" of his work.

The presence of the words *Ohne Titel* (Untitled) warns us against making associations, while titles allow interpretations or provide pointers. Seyhan gave a series of paintings created in Portugal the title *Schwarze Wellen* (Black Waves) because he felt that in certain weather and light conditions, these small, relief-like objects in shades ranging from grey to black had a sculptural quality. He was also inspired by the fact that Portuguese has several words referring specifically to the color of the ocean. These bas-reliefs built up with impasto paint on canvas can either be interpreted as structural paintings or – with the help of the title – as an almost naturalistic succession of wave crests.

The context of works with other biographical references – like Seyhan's interest in Byzantine and Ottoman architecture (especially in domes) is rather more complex. This interest is linked to his fascination with lead because of its material softness combined with a chromatic indistinction that causes the vast spatial volumes of domes against the sky to blur into flat planes and dissolve. The artist tells of such subjective yet strong sensations at various specific moments in his life that produced formative and lasting impressions, with permanent consequences for his color sensitivity and preferences. Lead was also a stimulus for his impressive sculptural oeuvre. A related issue lies in the traces of his interest in archaeology – especially in the excavation sites of Hittite cultures – revealed in his work; for example, in relation to the layers of paint and to the factor of time linked to their formation.

Not only does Kemal Seyhan allow the reality of life to penetrate the fundamentally rational, functionalistic and empirical cosmos of his analytical painting, which is nevertheless open to mistakes, errors and coincidences, this quality is actually a distinguishing feature of his art.

Content and form may be the same, but behind this neutral identity lies something else that ultimately distinguishes artworks, raising them above mere visual experiences, something that we might define as The Secret of Art.