

Christophe Schütte: The Beauty of Decay

No one will be coming here any more. The words “Men, women, kids welcome” appear at the edge of the scene, but not a single guest will ever be served in this restaurant again.

Repeatedly, Judith Ammann fills an entire picture with a wall, a facade, a blue gateway, words such as “Not an exit” in peeling red on a white ground, or an “I love you” evidently just barely still managing to cling to a long-since-abandoned billboard. Perhaps—who knows?—it’s a love story. Fulfilled yearnings, dashed hopes, unrequited affection. No one knows to whom the message may have been addressed, whether it promised happiness or the opposite or whether it even contained something like truth. Yet it existed once.

Someone wrote these words, and if we want to discover a glimmer of hope in them, then that is what Ammann’s photographs also describe. And their futility.

Ammann already made this tension between presence and absence the primary theme in her early videos, showing scenes devoid of people and devoid of God, and already there it was things—the light, perhaps, and the wind—that started to speak, quietly, but audibly.

With an astonishing quality of concretion and concentration, her photographic works thus exhibit a consistency with what she began several years ago on her forays in and around Los Angeles. Naturally, a Los Angeles which, more than anything else, is above all a suburb.

Deserted and desolate industrial and commercial areas asserting themselves as eloquent witnesses to the passing of time on the periphery. They are images of a decaying, an abandoned American dream of the kind that can perhaps be discovered as well in the painting of Edward Hopper, or in William Eggleston’s provincial America. Yet the Swiss artist Judith Ammann not only goes about taking her pictures in a different way, and of course in a different era. At its core, her subject is also an entirely different one. Her focus is on surfaces gradually rusting away, chipping, peeling, palimpsest-like—on the surfaces and nothing else, for, without exception, she removes them from their spatial context. As a result, her images convey time—and decay itself. Without pathos, yet in all its beauty.

With her most recent works, though, Ammann takes yet another decisive step forward. Until about two or three years ago it was words (from signs and billboards) and graffiti—“Liquor” or “Not an exit”—and all the other traces left behind by oblivion and decay that set the tone perceivable in all of her works. Now, however, she—and her viewers—are less and less

dependent on such narrative elements. The contents of her imagery—the feel for the right light, the painterly qualities and (as light-handed as it is masterly) the conversion from space into graphic surface—has always had the capacity to touch us with great immediacy. These qualities have since been joined by a growing concentration on minimalist structures and compositions. The effect is breathtaking: what emerges from cool form is nothing but sound. Everything—the melancholy, the loneliness, the abandonment—is all as present as ever, but in images which appear more abstract than ever. Now it is not just things, an era, an atmosphere, whose disappearance we marvel at one last time, but what holds them together. And in view of Ammann's so precisely composed images, Frank Stella's famous "What you see is what you see" takes on new meaning. The beauty of form, however—now a reminiscence of Concrete Art, now of Color-Field painting—speaks entirely from within itself, even in the stage of decay. Has Judith Ammann's art ever been more poetic?

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