

Julia Haller

Surface Tension

by Melanie Ohnemus

There's a certain fragility to the drawings of Julia Haller. Using thin but gestural lines, she works on materials like canvas, glass and mineral composite board. Her drawings, all untitled, are sometimes peopled with figures or objects, or else simply with zigzagging gestures or scratches seemingly made in passing. When engaging with Haller's works, one is left to decide for oneself what one sees in the drawings (or whether it is important to know). When asked about their origins and possible content, she remains vague, admitting that while they depict specific scenarios, she prefers not to name them. More important to her is their formal stability – a certain balance between surfaces, framing and marks. This hints at an interest in withdrawal. Their indeterminate lines invoke a sense of withdrawal, making Haller's drawings difficult to write about precisely because this liminal zone seems to shirk articulation. Whereas the written word struggles to take possession, Haller's work is based on a form of communication that prompts discourse (such as themes of surface and seriality, apparent formalism), before blocking and interrupting it (the gestural drawings are made on paper and then transferred using various procedures). In a positive sense, this creates space and freedom; in a negative sense, it may create disinterest due to their inscrutability.

Haller's works could thus be read partly as a nod to postwar gestural abstraction, especially its new form of risk-taking and the wish for expanded space. But the comparison does not quite work: the intimate indeterminacy of Haller's drawings is captured and, in a way, 'managed' by their technical transfer onto various surfaces. Moreover, the formal state in which the indeterminacy takes place is too pointed: the drawings are set on surfaces that undergo experimental treatment or emphasize specific aspects of the materials. As such, Haller's choice of materials in itself opens up an added dimension that must be reconciled with the formal qualities of the lines.

In her latest works (shown in 2015 and 2014 at Christian Andersen, Copenhagen, and Meyer Kainer, Vienna) she treated the canvas with a mixture of animal glue and iron oxide pigment, creating a dark, thin-looking base that does not hide the traces of its application. Haller then placed these canvases behind UV-coated, anti-reflective glass that causes the surface layer to shimmer between black and purple, depending on the light and the viewer's position. The drawings themselves are engraved onto this glass, yet they disappear from certain angles. The frames were constructed to stand a few millimetres away from the wall, reinforcing the works' sense of suspension. Made in various formats, they appear both serial and autonomous at the same time, cohering as a group but also as individual works (being untitled, their stated specifications differ only in their dimensions).

Another serial work was shown in 2014 in parallel exhibitions at the Vienna galleries Meyer Kainer and Diana Lambert: white mineral composite boards of different sizes mounted in thin aluminium frames. The drawings are engraved onto the panels and filled in with blue acrylic paint. The show at Meyer Kainer featured works made using the artist's right hand, at Diana Lambert their counterparts drawn with the left. In each gallery, an empty space was reserved for the absent other half of the series. Also in 2014, Haller showed works for which she transferred her drawings directly onto gouache mixed with bone and rabbit-skin glue. More through chance than design, the canvases still bear the wavy marks of their drying process on a radiator.

It seems important to emphasize the care with which two supposedly distinct aspects are related to one another in Haller's pieces. The first aspect is the formalist first-impression lent by the works: serial, closely managed in form, realisation, material, framing and hanging. The next is Haller's experimental approach to paint, application and graphic gesture. And finally, a further interweaving is built into these two fields: distancing from the intimacy of drawing by engraving, milling and transferring, while at the same time working with visual effects (shimmering colour in glass, a surface altered by hot air, use of materials that appear strangely hard and soft). Linking intimacy and conceptuality, Haller's approach is one of balance through and through – treating both ends, formal and physical equally as a way to counteract and counterbalance each other. (Frieze, 2015)

Translated by Nicholas Grindell