

**Markus Gadiant****Changes, 2009 –2010****Doublelife**

## The Pfaueninsel

At the end of the seventeenth century, when it stank and belched smoke on the Pfaueninsel (Peacock Island) in the Havel River, the reputation of an uncanny magic island clung to it. The inventor Johann Kunckel was working in his alchemical workshop there. Years and decades passed, and life on the island changed. In the early nineteenth century, King Friedrich Wilhelm III decreed that the grounds should be converted, and to that end he hired Peter Joseph Lenné, the most celebrated landscape architect in Prussia. It was the age of Romanticism, when people were passionately striving to interweave human beings, animals, and nature, to bring together opposites, the familiar and the exotic, in harmony. Thus Lenné de-signed a refined mise-en-scène that transformed the site into "Berlin's Arcadia." Theodor Fontane had experienced the heyday of the Pfaueninsel when he was a child and later described it as an "oasis," with menageries and aviaries full of exotic animals, monkeys, bears, kangaroos, alligators, and parrots.<sup>1</sup> K. F. Schinkel's fantastic Palmenhaus also stood there; between 1832 and 1834, Carl Blechen paint-ed it in several paintings that resemble a scene from *One Thousand and One Nights*.

Several years later, under Friedrich Wilhelm IV, the place fell out of fashion somewhat. Nevertheless, Fontane tells how, on the evening of July 15, 1852, the king and his guest, Czar Nicholas I, were ferried over to the Pfaueninsel, where Demoiselle Rachel awaited them. Elisa Rachel Félix, the most famous actress of her century, who was born by chance in an inn in Mumpf (in the Canton of Aarau in Switzerland), the daughter of itinerant peddlers of French-Jewish origin. The actress had been engaged that evening to recite scenes from her major roles. Shortly before her performance, however, she was about to rush off in a rage, because she had to perform here, rather in the much more comfortable Neues Palais in Potsdam. Surprisingly, nothing was planned for her: no costume was ready, and she even had to hold the lamp herself, so she could be seen in the dark. Only the temptation of an opportunity to fire the czar with enthusiasm and win an invitation to Saint Petersburg kept her from taking offense and leaving. And so a bare patch of grass on the Pfaueninsel became her stage. As expected, the czar was enthralled by the gifted tragédienne, and barely a year passed before Demoiselle Rachel was touring Russia to great success.

Around a century and a half later, the Pfaueninsel became a source of inspiration for Markus Gadiant. In 2006, in a series of paintings titled *Serendipity*, he began to make out-and-out portraits of the place. In 2009, he produced a considerable number more. The views reproduce the scenery-like, idyllic landscape with the famous lines of sight Lenné gave it and above all its play of light and shadow. Gadiant reflects on the site with complete devotion to the details. But he instills a double life in his canvases, causing them to become venues of ghostly phenomena. Unidentifiable, expressive brushstrokes and abstract forms join the scene like actors. Always in the foreground, they float like captured gestures, sometimes dancing playfully in space, elsewhere rising like sparks from fireworks out of a glaring light and into the evening sky (*Serendipity* No. 31) or combining to form a vibrating, gray tangle (*Serendipity* No. 35). Demoiselle Rachel could have performed along with them. In other paintings, a matte black field pushes its way in from the side and forward, heavily and powerfully, self-confidently covering three-quarters of the landscape in *Serendipity* No. 29. Disheveled, glaringly white brushstrokes hurl themselves across the painted clearing in the park, making the play of light and shadow even more spectacular. At first glance, one might think abstract painting had sought to extinguish the representation disrespectfully or even iconoclastically, as if Gadiant were punishing his bravura as a painter. More and more, however, we are captivated by the challenging play of relationships

between the representational and the abstract. In the double life of these canvases, as a place for reproduction and a surface for action, a strategic alienation effect sets in, protecting both the painter and the viewer from the temptation to get lost in the overindulgent pathos of a Romantic feeling toward nature. The interventions disturb us and offer reflection on an expanded horizon of meaning.

In the field of art history, in an oft-cited article from 1952 about American Action Painting, Harold Rosenberg wrote that the canvas had become an arena, a field for artistic action, no longer the space in which a real or imagined object was reproduced and analyzed.<sup>2</sup> These days, art has long since permitted thinking and acting in both categories. Whenever the abstract coincides with the figurative, associations with Gerhard Richter's complex of works involving overpainted photographs inevitably arise. Without a doubt, Gadiot has not failed to notice Richter. But whereas Richter's photographs are usually private snapshots of the trivial and quotidian, Gadiot is interested in the archetypal, ideal, and sublime landscape that belongs to collective memory. A lack of plan as a working principle is not something that proceeds from his process of painting. No squeegee is drawn over the canvas, leaving behind uncontrolled traces. In Gadiot's work, everything is painted with a brush. His landscapes are produced in series or cycles, whereby the same motifs are manifested in ever new ways. Once again the abstract interventions appear in the image in similar form and in the same places—another sign that their placement is not left to an automatic impulse. Hence the title *Serendipity* does not seem to mean surprising and fortunate coincidence, as the definition of the word would have it, but rather grasping energetic forces that the artist knows how to recognize and make visible. Paradoxically, the invisible becomes visible when what is represented is painted over, or rather the superficial is superimposed by the profound. However, if examined precisely, the abstract forms, which at first seem like alien bodies in the painting, also correspond to the enlargement of the brushwork in representational painting and lead to an expansion of time and space in the object depicted, making it present.

#### Wildenstein

If the ideal landscape of the Pfaueninsel, with its theatrical staging of the grandiose machinery for representing the Prussian monarchy, then a very different spirit inhabits the oak wood in the Wildenstein. Gadiot feels particularly close to this landscape, since it is located in the Canton of Baselland, where he was born. This place has preoccupied him as an artist since 1990, but he has been fascinated by its trees since childhood. His father told him it was a living memorial to the heroes of the Battle of St. Jakob an der Birs. Hemann Sevogel, the former owner of Wildenstein Castle, fell in the legendary battle in 1444 as the courageous leader of Basel's troops against the French, as Switzerland's former national anthem attests: "Hail Helvetia! You still have sons like those Saint Jakob saw ...". The trees can be shown to have been planted more than 520 years ago, and today they constitute the last stand of oaks in Switzerland. Like old and wise solitary beings, they stand there and harbor the memory of the historical event but even more so of the existential experiences of nature, animals, and human beings. They embody growth, strength, endurance, and destruction, though even their dead trunks and branches still seem to contain a great deal of energy. In their imposing presence, they evoke all the mythical meanings that have been attributed to oaks in all cultures since time immemorial. To put it quite mundanely, this oak grove also bears witness to medieval agriculture. For if it was Lenné's genius that made the Pfaueninsel a UNESCO World Heritage Site, at Wildenstein Castle it is rather the pigs who have cleared their forest meadow and made it a dignified grove.

Pfaueninsel and Wildenstein—the names and their sound alone reveal how different these two places are in their essence. On the one hand, high, refined culture and courtly life and, on the other hand, earthy solemnity and remoteness. Gadiot captured these differences in delicate nuances in these two cycles. If the paintings of the Pfaueninsel are more like portraits of landscapes, then the Wildenstein Cycle is dominated by portraits of the individual trees, and the abstract forms here have a fateful, symbiotic relationship with the oaks. Sometimes they even replace the plants, now mown and torn out, that once accompanied the oaks, growing protectively around their trunks while also offering refuge for many insects and animals. Whether in *Serendipity*, the paintings of the Pfaueninsel, or in the Wildenstein Cycle, these canvases, in their double life as a place of depiction and field of action, offer the painter a structure for thoughts and feelings, and art takes on a role as mediator between nature and the mind or spirit.

1. Theodor Fontane, *Wanderungen durch die Mark Brandenburg*, (Munich: Hanser, 1987), pp. 198 ff.
2. Harold Rosenberg, *The American Action Painters*, in: *Art News* 51, no. 8 (December 1952), pp. 22–23, pp. 48–50.