

**Markus Gadient**

**Changes, 2009 –2010**

**Markus Gadient and the Nature of Painting**

Antoine Roquentin was sitting on a park bench and ruminating on a chestnut tree whose roots were boring directly into the earth beneath the bench. It was no Romantically idealized or botanical rumination about this tree but rather an attempt to come to terms with the question whether and how someone is in a position with mind and senses to get at the existence or essence of such a tree. “This root,” Roquentin said, “with its colour, shape, its congealed movement, was... below all explanation. Each of its qualities escaped it a little, flowed out of it, half solid-ified, almost became a thing; each one was in the way in the root and the whole stump now gave me the impression of unwinding itself a little, denying its existence to lose itself in a frenzied excess.”<sup>1</sup> Roquentin—or rather his author, Jean-Paul Sartre—interpreted this experience as an “experiment with the absolute,” whereby the absolute in this case is nothing that originated from any metaphysics but rather from the insight that the tree, the roots, the bark are “irreducible” in their entire complex appearance and thus not really essentially graspable for human beings.

One has a very similar experience in mind when one imagines Markus Gadient on a park bench like Roquentin—more precisely, in the English garden on the Pfaueninsel—ruminating on a piece of cultivated nature, trying to grasp it in its components, testing his gaze and his idea how a painting could be made of this motif in order to make this piece of nature the point of departure for a new series of paintings called Serendipity. Mind you, Markus Gadient is no plein air painter; rather, he transfers the motifs from the English garden on the Pfaueninsel into paintings using photographs, and he does so in his studio about a thousand kilometers south of Berlin. In this way, he created the painting Serendipity No. 19 of 2007, for example. It is a vertical format (81 x 65 cm) in oil on cotton, painted wet on wet. It shows a clearing surrounded by trees on the Pfaueninsel; in the background of the painting, it borders on low bushes at the waters of the Havel River. Extreme contrasts of light and shadow dominate the painting; the motif could not be more painterly. Precisely at that point, however, the painting flips over. The painting successively emancipates itself, working itself out of the seamless appearance of the motif in order to become independent at points or in planes. From out of the light-flooded zones of the foliage, slight brushstrokes escape into the blue sky; the view of the Havel is blocked by white overpainting; the shadow zone of the stock of trees on the left edge of the painting advances to become the dominant, opaque plane. The following year, in Painting No. 25, Markus Gadient painted the same motif again—this time, however, in the large format of 220 x 172 cm. This time, Gadient provided the motif with far more space, and yet the permeation of the painting is omnipresent. Covering brushstrokes fall like leaves from the sky in the heavy style. In this variation, the shadow zone on the left edge of the painting is not painted over; nevertheless, because of the formation and the resulting “size” of the painterly traces, the impression of autonomous painting predominates.

The title Serendipity suggests a sense for unexpected discoveries. In Markus Gadient’s work, it is a profoundly painterly sense, which penetrates far into the motif and the painting until their inner tension is released extremely productively. Just how much this moment of tension shapes Markus Gadient’s work is clarified by the Wildenstein Cycle as well, which now includes well over two hundred works. Sometimes the painting grows organically, as it were, out of the trees, roots, and branches, then it suddenly breaks into the motif again. The matter-of-factness with which Markus Gadient does justice to both aspects in this process is astonishing. For example, in the painting Wildenstein Cycle No. 207 of 2008, he builds up an enormous black plane in front of a gnarled tree, so that only the branches and top of the tree peek out from behind it. The black overpainting is without question the dominant aspect of this painting. And yet

the tree behind it asserts itself, just as if the blind spot of the painting drew even more attention to the motif in the margins. Painting No. 177 is very similar in structure, though the branches of the tree motif are refined into a great adaptation of Abstract Expressionism, in which painting as gesture claims all the attention for itself.

The painterly stance of Abstract Expressionism is so far from that of Romanticism that it scarcely seems possible to see them united in one and the same painting. One sentence cannot explain how Markus Gadiant nevertheless manages to do so. Is his painting deeply Romantic? Or is it highly considered in the spirit of a postmodern attitude and hence critically distanced? Or is it neither or both at once? These questions have to be negotiated before they can be answered. If one appeals to the essence of Romanticism, then it is a “a heightened sensitivity to the natural world, combined with a belief in nature’s correspond-ence to the mind,” as Joseph Leo Koerner has described it.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, however, according to Koerner, Roman-ticism is an “aesthetic of the infinite, the obscure, the ambivalent and the multivalent.”<sup>3</sup> Markus Gadiant’s painting sets out from that point, in that he removes the motif, which is without question connected to nature, from purely subjective perception and literally makes it the object of his painting. The ambivalence Koerner mentions is thus borne out on a higher level, or at least on a different one—namely, where Romanticism is only taken up or quoted in the painting as romanticizing. In this “romantic quality of the new images,” writes Beate Söntgen, in an essay on “the afterlife of Romanticism in contemporary art,” the process is overshadowed by rescinding—namely, by the “rescinding of immediacy”: The “pointing to the act of painting as some-thing that evokes second-hand images, and at the same time cancels them out, does not demonstrate here—as it did in Romanticism—the sovereignty of a creative subject [...]. Rather, it shows, with postmodern clear-headedness, art’s ability to mediate images and thereby preserve them in a redemptive disfigurement.”<sup>4</sup>

This trace of “romanticizing” in contemporary art is also found in works by Markus Gadiant, although the “rescinding” described here suddenly turns not into clear-headedness but rather into a quite productive conflict. This conflict does not permit any unbroken representation and interpretation. Rather, it balances out the essences of painting and of its traditions. The apparent irreconcilabilities are obvious: here Romanticism, there Modernism; here the clichéd image of nature, there its negation in the abstract gesture; here the immediacy of visible overpowering, there the critical distance of the painter who elevates the painterly itself to be the subject. The result is certainly not an indecisive not-only-but-also; rather, Markus Gadiant has faith, especially here, in his painterly sense for achieving a potential synthesis of the neither-nor. He manages it with a light hand but by no means thoughtlessly. For nature is just as essential to him as the nature of painting. The thing is just as important to him as the painting of it, the immediacy just as compelling as the critical distance. In all its complexity, this stance appears again in another great work from the Wildenstein Cycle. It is painting No. 196 from 2008. This work reveals in places an almost photorealistic immediacy: the lush green of a climbing plant winds up one side of the trunk, while the other side of the trunk is taken up by greenish lilac overpainting. The painting seems to have sunken its teeth into the motif like a parasitic plant, and yet this abstract gesture leads a quite au-tonomous existence in this romantic nature painting.

If we return to the beginning of the present text, it becomes clear that Markus Gadiant does not base directly on nature this experience of an absolute whose complex-ity cannot be reduced but rather on the nature of painting itself. That may be why Gadiant, contrary to the Romantic tradition, does not place figures or representatives in his paintings: the immediate effort to come to terms with the nature of painting takes place in front of the painting—between the painter and the painting or between the viewer and the painting. The idea of Markus Gadiant on the park bench and his experience of the absolute are thus quite consistent on the level of the idea; it is only the object of observation that is different. It is a painting. It is painting. Complex and irreducible. Like the roots of the chestnut tree on which Antoine Roquentin was ruminating in the scene described at the beginning: “This root, with its colour, shape, its congealed movement, was ... below all explan-ation. Each of its qualities escaped it a little, flowed out of it, half solidified, almost became a thing each one was in the way in the root and the whole stump now gave me the impression of unwinding itself a little, denying its existence to lose itself in a frenzied excess.”<sup>5</sup>

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1. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Nausea*, trans. Lloyd Alexander, (New York: New Directions, 1964), pp. 129–30.

2. Joseph Leo Koerner, *Caspar David Friedrich and the Subject of Landscape*, (New Haven, CT: Yale Univ. Press, 1990), p. 23.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 56.
4. See Beate Söntgen, *Behind the Figure's Back: The Afterlife of Romanticism in Contemporary Art*, trans. Steven Lindberg, in: Max Hollein and Martina Weinhart, eds., *Ideal Worlds: New Romanticism in Contemporary Art*, exh. cat., Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt am Main, (Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz, 2005), pp. 76–83, esp. p. 81.
5. Sartre, *Nausea* (see note 1), pp. 129–30.