

Quinn Latimer

Markus Gadiert
“Wide Color White”

“With grene trees shadwed was his place.”
—Geoffrey Chaucer, *Canterbury Tales*

Over the past three decades, Markus Gadiert’s subtle and serious body of work has explored the primary problem that the medium of painting faced in the twentieth century: the gulf between representation and abstraction, which can sometimes appear the darkest of forests, other times the narrowest of fields. To that end, his paintings—at once generous and withholding, clear-pitched and full of occluding shadows—might be said to function like foliage, simultaneously shading and revealing, evoking a private atmosphere of both contemplation and revelation. But “foliage” is not just used here as a metaphor. For the Basel-based artist’s primary subject has long been the illuminated tree, with all the figurative, landscape, and post-Romantic potential such a subject would suggest.

The exhibition on view at Tony Wuethrich Galerie is Gadiert’s fifth solo show with the gallery, and it offers three recent series of paintings that bring various species and constellations of trees (both man- and nature-made) into their purview. The most recent series concentrates on a forest that is both ancient and far-flung—the giant sequoias of California, some 3,000 years old. Entitled “Landschaften und Tore” (2011–) the paintings arose from a traveling grant that Gadiert received to visit the primeval forests that stud the American West Coast. Though the artist spent time in the bristlecone pine forest in the Sierra Nevada, it was his experience of the enormous copper-colored sequoias in Prairie Creek Redwood State Park that yielded these gorgeously illumined new works. The paintings elucidate Gadiert’s usual working method. He begins each work by painting a representational scene from a photograph, then overpaints his nearly photorealist canvas with gestural marks and drips and roughshod shapes of paint that have the psychological probity and the performative self-consciousness of Abstract Expressionism. If the tension between representation and abstraction is clearly articulated by this process, the resulting paintings yet still brim with a mysterious mastery of tone and form.

The “Landschaften und Tore” paintings, for example, are expert plays with light and shadow. Nearly pitch-black tree trunks (which can feel like dark monochromes rearing up inside the larger realist frame) are backlit by the filmy white-and-green light that filters through the forest cover. The fluorescent fauna glows like a photogram behind white shapes that have the aspect of spectral ghosts (of abstract painting, perhaps) moving through the pastoral landscape. In contrast, the “Serendipity” (2006–) series pulls back, offering long, theatrical views of the Pfaueninsel near Berlin, famously transformed by the landscape architect Peter Joseph Lenné in the early nineteenth century into a faux Arcadian idyll. Here trees frame the lush grounds like curtains; the Havel River runs like a stage in the distance. And then again, atop this image—emphasizing that it is in fact only an image, that the painting has a surface, and that the appearance of depth is only an illusion—is a series of quick, confetti-like brush strokes in a medley of colors that hover in the blue painted air like birds.

If California and Germany provide the inspiration for these two bodies of work, Gadiert’s third series is evermore local and personal. Entitled “Zyklus Wildenstein” (1990 - ongoing) it features paintings of solitary oaks in the titular forest in Baselland, where the artist was born. The oaks were planted more than

five hundred years ago to commemorate the fallen Basler troops in the Battle of St. Jakob. In Gadiert's paintings of the area, a recurring image of a twisted, dying tree—its trunk dressed in vines, its leafless branches awkward and broken and disordered—stands against a pale blue sky. Against this figure in a landscape (the most traditional of traditional painting matter) large swaths and shapes of gestural paint assert themselves. Greenish-yellow brushstrokes occlude a section of branches; a splotch of black disfigures the ground.

In the "Wildenstein" canvases, as in the others, the two primary modes of painting collide and collude and yet remain separate. In this way the representational sections take on the aspect of abstraction—is that dark tree trunk a black monochrome?—while the abstract markings inspire an anthropomorphic response from the spectator. A shapeless circle of black paint suddenly suggests a flock of crows; a thin veil of white paint conjures a ghost. It is to Gadiert's credit that the clarity of his formal process and conceptual concerns should put forward such a complexity of thought and feeling and identification in the spectator. As Geoffrey Chaucer wrote in the prologue to his famed *Canterbury Tales*, "With grene trees shadwed was his place." It certainly appears that Gadiert's place also exists in this poetically imagined and yet very real space, where green trees drop shade like paint, where the figure of the tree replaces the figure of the human, and where representation and abstraction are simply competing shadows piercing the same tree, darkening the same ground.

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